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# “LATIN” OR “CONCILIAR,” BUT STILL INCOHERENT: A REJOINDER TO SCOTT M. WILLIAMS

William Hasker

I argue that Scott M. Williams’s “Latin/Conciliar Social Trinity” is unable to give a coherent account of some undisputed divine actions. The reason for this lies in Williams’s failure to recognize the different senses in which the trinitarian Persons can be said to have “powers.”

Is Scott Williams’s “Latin (now Conciliar) Social Trinity” coherent and believable? That is the main question that needs to be answered in our discussion. However, Williams has devoted much of his lengthy paper to the question whether his model is in agreement with certain statements endorsed by the Sixth Ecumenical Council.<sup>1</sup> I agree that it is of interest to consider this question, but in view of my limited space<sup>2</sup> I must set it aside for the present. (I will return to this briefly later on.) I can not, however, leave unanswered his observations concerning Gregory of Nyssa. After responding briefly to those observations, I will go on to consider the questions about coherence and believability.

Williams quotes the paragraph [2] from Gregory’s “On ‘Not Three Gods,’” and summarizes my interpretation by saying that, in my view, “the only way to make sense of Gregory’s statements is to interpret him as claiming that the divine persons (necessarily) agree on what is willed and should be willed. The divine persons (always) share a common pursuit or goal.” He acknowledges that “Hasker’s interpretation is *prima facie* plausible, if we read it out of context.” The needed context, he implies, is found in the paragraph he labels [1], which precedes [2] in Gregory’s text. The crucial passage in [1] states,

But in reference to divine nature, we have learned that [it] is not the case [that] the Father does something individually, in which the Son does not join, or [that] the Son individually works something without the Spirit; but

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<sup>1</sup>In view of Williams’s extensive research on this topic, it was inappropriate for me to describe his method as “proof-texting.”

<sup>2</sup>The editor has kindly allowed me a very brief response to Williams’s lengthy piece, but there is a limit to this hospitality.



every activity which pervades from God to creation and is named according to our manifold designs starts off from the Father, proceeds through the Son, and is completed by the Holy Spirit. On account of this, the name of activity is not divided into the multitude of those who are active.

I maintain that, once we set aside Williams's tendentious commentary, this passage fits my interpretation at least as well as it does his. It is clear, to be sure, that the "activity which pervades from God to creation" is a single activity which involves all of the Persons of the Trinity. But note: this activity "starts off from the Father, proceeds through the Son, and is completed by the Holy Spirit." This clearly implies that, while all three are involved in the single activity, there is a difference in the *manner* of their involvement; otherwise, why the contrast between "starts off," "proceeds," and "is completed"? This point is picked up in paragraph [2], which immediately follows. I do not think it is correct to say that the passage from John is introduced as a potential objection to Gregory's own account. The problem with the passage is simply that, by saying that the Father judges no man, it appears to contradict what is said elsewhere in Scripture, that the Father is the judge of all the earth. The answer to this follows up on what has just been said in the contrast between "starts off," "proceeds," and "is completed":

He Who judges all the earth does this by His Son to Whom He has committed all judgment; and everything which is done by the Only-Begotten has its reference to the Father, so that He Himself is at once the Judge of all things and judges no man, by reason of His having, as we said, committed all judgment to the Son.

The one activity of judging "starts off" in virtue of the Father's appointing of the Son to carry it out,<sup>3</sup> and "proceeds" in virtue of the activity of the Son, who does the actual judging. (The precise role of the Spirit is not specified; perhaps he brings home to the mind and heart of the one judged the wisdom and justice of the judgment that has been rendered.) This differentiation of roles continues in paragraph [3]: "the principle of power of oversight and beholding in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is one. It starts off from the Father as from a spring; it is effected by the Son, and by the power of the Spirit it completes its grace." Williams dismisses the distinction of verbs as irrelevant, but he ignores the way the distinction tracks the different roles assigned in [2] to the Father and the Son. On the other hand, the "principle of power of oversight" is a "power" in a different sense than the sense in which I am using that word. This "principle of power" is indeed a single, common principle, which belongs to each of the Persons because all of them share in the single divine nature. The way I am using 'power' is different, as I shall now explain.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Clearly, I exaggerated by saying, "No one delegates a task to himself." This can indeed happen, under special circumstances. But there is nothing in either the Gospel or the passage from Gregory to suggest that this is what is happening here.

<sup>4</sup>As I see it, the passage Williams cites from the *Antirheticus* adds nothing to the discussion; it only brings in some complications that result from the incarnation.

We turn to the question of coherence. I believe that in addressing this question, it is important to realize that ‘power’ can be used in several different senses; it is necessary, then, to be clear which sense is in play in a given statement. When I am speaking, as I do, of the distinct powers of the divine Persons, I normally mean by ‘power’ *the ability to perform a particular action on a given occasion*. The general “power of willing,” of a divine Person, is that Person’s ability to have, and to exercise, “powers” in the sense just mentioned. So understood, a divine Person’s power of willing is of necessity unique to that Person, because it consists, at least in part, in the powers of that Person to perform certain actions. There is, on the other hand, what Gregory terms the “principle of power,” which is common to all three Persons: each of them partakes of this principle of power in virtue of his possession of the one divine nature. The principle of power, one might say, is the general ability to perform divine actions, without regard to the agent or to how these actions are specified. So there are indeed multiple senses of ‘power’; my view is a multi-powers view only when ‘power’ is understood in the first two of the ways I have just explained. My main emphasis, in fact, will be on the first way of understanding ‘power,’ in which power is the ability to perform a certain act under particular circumstances. One-power theorists, on the other hand, will deny that any Person has a power of willing distinct from that of any other Persons; *a fortiori*, they will deny that any Person has a power to perform some particular action which is not also a power of the other Persons.

Now when we understand power in the first of these ways, there are certain powers—call them “self-terminating” powers—to perform actions that terminate on the agent himself, and therefore cannot be exercised by anyone else. As I am writing this, there is in my refrigerator a carton of strawberry cheesecake ice cream. In view of this I have the power, at this very moment, to go to the refrigerator, take out the ice cream, and eat some of it. I also have the power to refrain from so doing—and this is what I shall in fact do, since I need to make progress in writing this article. No one else, however, can possibly exercise either the power that I have to eat strawberry cheesecake ice cream, or my power to refrain from exercising that power. Now, consider a similar (but also very dissimilar) situation: A divine Person, for instance the Son, has the power to become incarnate at a given time (say, around the year 3 B.C.E.). The Son also has the power to refrain from becoming incarnate at that time. (The incarnation is a gracious, and contingent, action of the Son, one he need not have performed.) Similar powers belong to the Father and to the Holy Spirit. This power the Son has to become incarnate is one that can only be exercised, and can only be possessed, by the Son himself; neither the Father nor the Holy Spirit has or is able to exercise this power, though each of them has his own power either to become incarnate or to refrain from doing so. There is, then, the power of the Son, which he exercises by becoming incarnate, and there are the corresponding powers of the Father and of the Holy Spirit, which each of them exercises by refraining from becoming incarnate. In view of this, we

do not need scholarly research into seventh century theologians in order to determine whether a one-power or a multi-power view better accords with "conciliar theology." On the contrary, right there in the Nicene Creed we see that it is said of the Son, and only of the Son, that "for us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven, by the power of the Holy Spirit he was born of the virgin Mary, and became man." This is not said, and could not be said, of the Father or of the Holy Spirit. Neither the Father nor the Spirit came down from heaven, was born of a virgin, or became man. The power of the Son to do those things was actually exercised by the Son; this power was not exercised, or even possessed, by either of the other Persons.

Two other acts that are unique to only one Person are the act of eternally generating the Son, and the act of eternally spirating the Holy Spirit; the powers to perform these acts are peculiar to the Father. We might term these powers as "other-generating powers." Neither the Son nor the Spirit performs these acts; they cannot do so, since the very being of the Son and of the Spirit is the consequence of these acts being performed by the Father.<sup>5</sup> And since the Son and the Spirit cannot perform these actions, neither do they have the power to perform them.<sup>6</sup> Now, I do not believe the seventh-century theologians cited by Professor Williams were ignorant of these facts. I conclude, therefore, that when they said there is only a single power that is common to all three Persons, they had in mind a different sense of 'power' than the one I am employing in this discussion—one corresponding to the "the principle of power of oversight and beholding" mentioned by Gregory. And, given their own sense of 'power' they may well have been right; so far as I can see, I would have no reason to disagree with them.

These are not, to be sure, the only instances in which one Person exercises powers in a way such that the exercise is not shared with the other two Persons; the instances mentioned above were selected because they will prove especially difficult for the one-power theorist to explain away. Another very interesting example is provided by Karl Rahner, who argues for this in the case of the "not-appropriated relations of the divine persons to the justified" (Rahner 1970, 37). He states, "An immediate intuition of the divine persons, not mediated by a created 'impressed species' but only by the intuited reality of the intuited object in itself . . . means necessarily an ontological relation of the intuiting subject to each one of the intuited persons in itself in their real particularity" (Rahner 1970, 37n). In other

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<sup>5</sup>These of course are divine acts *ad intra*, within God, and so do not fall within the scope of the formula, *opera trinitatis ad extra sunt indivisa*. Nevertheless, they demonstrate the Father's possession of powers (in my sense) which the Son and the Spirit do not have.

<sup>6</sup>In Williams (2020, 116) he states that "The power for generating a divine Son is shared among divine persons because it is grounded in the shared divine essence, but only the Father exercises it." I agree that this power is grounded in the divine essence, but it cannot be shared by the Son, because the Son exists only in virtue of the power's being exercised by the Father. Nor can it be shared by the Spirit, unless we assume that the spiration of the Spirit is somehow prior to the generation of the Son. And the fact remains that the generation of the Son is an act of will of the Father alone, not of the Son and the Spirit, which contradicts the core assertion of the Latin/Conciliar Social model of the Trinity.

words, each divine Person, in his own right, exercises a power to relate to the justified person in a certain way, which is an instance of precisely what I have been arguing for. There will be many other examples.

In view of all this, I believe that Williams, as a one-power theorist, will have a great deal of difficulty in providing an adequate and persuasive account of the sorts of examples I have provided. However, he has produced answers to some detailed criticisms of his view I have previously adduced. After consideration, I have decided not to offer further answers to most of those answers of his. Doing that, I fear, might tend to get the whole discussion bogged down in minutiae; in addition, it would require more space than I have available.

I will, however, mention just one of those points. According to Williams, when the divine Persons share the use of a token, in the divine language of thought, of "I am wise," each of the Persons is aware of a different proposition. The Father is aware of the proposition, "I the Father am wise"; the Son is aware of the proposition, "I the Son am wise"; and the Holy Spirit is aware of the proposition, "I the Holy Spirit am wise." I then ask, "Where is the ontological account of the awareness on the part of each Person of the diverse propositions of which each of them becomes aware?" It seems to me that the most plausible answer is that each Person is the subject of an act of propositional awareness with respect to the proposition in question. (One merit of this answer is its conciseness.) Williams, however, cannot accept this answer, because it would mean that each Person is the subject of his own mental act, one that is not shared with the other two Persons. In order to avoid saying such a thing, Williams presents us with about seven journal pages of discussion—a bit more than I have been allotted for this entire article! Readers are invited to compare our two accounts, and decide which is the more coherent and plausible.

In closing, I briefly summarize my main argument. By 'power' I mean the ability to perform a specific action under specific circumstances. In this sense of 'power,' persons have power to do many different things. In many trinitarian cases a power of this sort is peculiar to one trinitarian Person and not common to all three Persons. It is in this sense that mine is a multi-powers view. There is another sense of 'power' in which all of the powers of each of the Persons come to him in virtue of that Person's possession of the one concrete divine nature, which is common to all three Persons. In this sense of 'power' it is appropriate and correct to say that there is one divine power which is shared by all three Persons. However, the "Latin (Conciliar) Social" view of the Trinity requires that there be only a single, common power also in the first sense.<sup>7</sup> But this is impossible,

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<sup>7</sup>Williams states (Williams 2020, 100), that a quotation he cites, and endorses, from Pope Agatho, "asserts that there is just one divine 'power,' and one 'essential will and operation.'" Williams goes on to say, "I take it that 'essential will' is (roughly) equivalent to a faculty of will and [one] operation' to be (roughly) equivalent to one act of will (a volition)." In my view, much if not all of the difficulty with Williams's view stems from his failure to recognize the different senses of 'power.'

because there are divine "self-terminating actions," that can only be performed by one Person and which therefore are the actualization of powers that are peculiar to that Person, as well as "other-generating actions" that likewise can only be performed by one Person. When the one-power view is combined with these facts, the view becomes incoherent.

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