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THE PROBLEM OF THE TRINITY:
Is there a middle way between modalism and tritheism?
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Abstract

It is the thesis of this paper that there is no viable route between modalism and tritheism for a Trinity defined in the ways that theologians have attempted. There is no internally consistent way of defining or explaining a Trinity which does not result in shipwreck either on the 'Scylla' of modalism or in the 'Charybdis' of tritheism. There are three ambiguities and confusions in the attempted definitions of the Trinity which have tended to obscure these difficulties.

1. The supposed 'middle way' between modalism and tritheism

Since the fourth century theologians and philosophers have expended much ink and paper in the cause of showing that there is a viable middle way for the doctrine of the Trinity between two perceived heresies. On the one hand is the 'Scylla'[1] of modalism, meaning one God with different personal manifestations, properties or ways of being. On the other side is the 'Charybdis' of tritheism, meaning three gods.

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[1] Scylla and Charybdis are two sea monsters taken from Greek mythology. Scylla is rationalised as a rock shoal and Charybdis as a whirlpool. They guard a narrow strait, often identified as the Strait of Messina between Sicily and the Italian mainland. The strait is too narrow for ships to pass safely. If they steer to avoid the one, they will be shipwrecked upon the other. In the Odyssey, Odysseus chooses Scylla and loses a few sailors rather than his whole ship in Charybdis.

The famous problem of the Trinity is that no way can be found of defining a Trinity with three distinct Persons of equal divinity which does not also imply three different gods. If the Persons are truly distinct, with separate consciousness, wills, memories and emotions, and they share a divine nature, then they are three distinct divine beings, i.e. three gods. If an attempt is made to unite the Persons together more strongly than by possession of a common divine nature, such as by asserting each Person is numerically identical to God, then the distinctness of the Persons is lost, and the result is modalism.

It is this 'monstrous dilemma' which Gregory of Nyssa[2] (and thousands of theologians since) struggled to resolve. There are three confusions in trinitarian definitions which obscure this dilemma.

2. Attempts to define or explain the Trinity

A basic definition is from the Westminster Confession:
In the unity of the Godhead there be three persons, of one substance, power and eternity: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost

Article 1 of the 39 Articles of the Church of England states:
There is but one living and true God, everlasting, without body, parts, or passions; of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness; the maker and preserver of all things both visible and invisible. And in unity of this Godhead there be three Persons, of one substance, power, and eternity; the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost

Numerous writers have attempted definitions and clarifications. Here are some modern examples.

Gregory Boyd: '*The doctrine of the Trinity simply states that God fully exists in three personally distinct ways*'.[3]

William Lane Craig defines the Trinity in terms of centres of consciousness: '*there is one God who has three centers of self-consciousness: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit*'.[4] Craig uses the example of the three-headed dog Cerberus of Greek mythology as a model for how different centres of consciousness could co-operate together in a single body: 'Despite the diversity of his mental states, Cerberus is clearly one dog. He is one three-headed dog, a single biological organism which exemplifies a canine nature'.[5]

Millard Erickson talks about the Trinity as '*a society, a complex of persons, who, however are one being*',[6] and that the '*three persons constitute three centers of consciousness within the one being*'.[7]

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[2] Gregory of Nyssa, *Answer to Abablius: On Not Three Gods*. < http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/2905.htm> [accessed 7 October 2013]
[3] Gregory Boyd, *Oneness Pentecostals and the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992), p50.
[4] William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, Defenders Podcast Series 2: Doctrine of the Trinity (Part 1) http://www.reasonablefaith.org/defenders-2-podcast/transcript/s5-1 [accessed 13 July 2013].
[5] William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, Defenders Podcast Series 2: Doctrine of the Trinity (Part 8) http://www.reasonablefaith.org/defenders-2-podcast/transcript/s5-8 [accessed 13 July 2013].
[6] Millard J. Erickson, *Making Sense of the Trinity: Three Crucial Questions* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), p.58.
[7] Erickson, *Making Sense of the Trinity*, p.67.

Wayne Grudem: '*God eternally exists as three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and each person is fully God, and there is one God*'.[8]

Robert Morey: '*While there is only one God numerically speaking, yet, within this one God, there exists more than one person, ego, intellect or self*'.[9]

Cornelius Van Til: '*God exists in himself as a triune self-consciously active being. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost are each a personality and together constitute the exhaustingly personal God.*'[10]

James White: '*Within the one Being that is God, there exists eternally three coequal and coeternal persons, namely, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit … we are talking about one what and three who's. The one what is the Being or essence of God; the three who's are the Father, Son and Spirit*'.[11]

There are differences between these definitions and explanations. For instance Gregory Boyd's definition is more akin to modalism than most trinitarians would be comfortable with. Some trinitarians (e.g. Van Til) consider that the triune God is a 'he', whereas others (e.g. White) consider that God is an 'it'. There are also disagreements over the applicability of analogies like Cerberus.[12]

We will use the following as a working definition:

(A) God is one Being
(B) There are (exactly) three Persons in this one God
(C) The Persons are distinct from each other
(D) Each Person is God
(E) The Persons share the Being of the one God

This definition is fairly representative of those given above. We now try to outline the three confusions and ambiguities in trinitarian definitions.

3. The ambiguity of 'Person'

Trinitarian definitions almost always use the term 'Person'. In the above example it is used four times. Much therefore depends on what is meant by 'person'. However the word is notorious for its ambiguity, and dictionaries are no help.[13] Is a 'Person' of the Trinity a

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[8] Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Leicester: IVP, 1994), p.226.

[9] Robert Morey, *The Trinity: Evidence and Issues* (Las Vegas: Christian Scholar's Press, 2005), p.87.

[10] Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 2nd edn, ed. by William Edgar (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2003), p29.

[11] James White, *The Forgotten Trinity* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1998), pp.26-27.

[12] For instance James White strongly criticises William Lane Craig's use of the Cerberus analogy to explain the Trinity and his use of the film *Avatar* to provide a model for the incarnation. White maintains that the Trinity and the incarnation are unique revelations of God which cannot be modelled by other situations. *Alpha and Omega Ministries: The Dividing Line*, 12 July 2013. http://www.aomin.org/aoblog/ [accessed 20 July 2013].

[13] For instance the Free Online Dictionary lists nine meanings for 'person':

1. A living human. Often used in combination: *chairperson; spokesperson; salesperson.*

2. An individual of specified character: *a person of importance.*

3. The composite of characteristics that make up an individual personality; the self.

4. The living body of a human: *searched the prisoner's person.*

'person' something like a human 'person', meaning a separate personality with its own will, memories, emotions and voice (as in Morey's definition above)? Or does it mean just a personal way in which God manifests himself (as in Boyd's definition above)? We might call the former a 'strong' sense and the latter a 'weak' sense. A Trinity with three 'Persons' in the weak sense is essentially some kind of modalism.

This potential ambiguity goes back to the original definitions used to formulate the Trinity. In the Western Roman Empire, the Latin word *persona* was used. This means something like a 'mask' or a 'role', and is close to the weak sense. The English word 'person' is of course derived from *persona*. In the East, the Greek word *hypostasis* was used, meaning something like 'independent existence' and much closer to the strong sense. This difference in meaning was a potential source of misunderstanding between West and East.

God may be several 'Persons' in the weak sense without being different 'Persons' in the strong sense. However the classical Trinity expounded by modern apologists needs the '*strong*' definition of 'person', because it takes its support from literal interpretation of New Testament texts which show the alleged 'Persons' as distinct personalities, not just as modes of the one God.

For example, when Jesus said "*... glorify me together with yourself, with the glory which I had with you before the world was*" (John 17.5), the trinitarian interpretation is that 'God the Son' is talking of his literal memory of the time he was with 'God the Father' before the creation of the world. For this to be true in the sense that the classical Trinity requires, 'God the Son' and 'God the Father' have to be different personalities with separate memories.

Therefore if there is a 'God the Son' in the sense that the classical Trinity requires, this 'God the Son' has to be a different 'person' in the *strong* sense from 'God the Father'. The obvious problem arises that this definition now appears to present three different divine individual, three gods. The problem is obscured by ambiguity between weak and strong sense of 'Person'.

4. The conflation of numerical identity and generic identity

The second confusion is over what it means to say that some individual 'is God'. In the definition given above, **(D) Each Person is God** is understood to mean:

(D1) 'God the Father' is God
and

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5. Physique and general appearance.
6. *Law* A human or organization with legal rights and duties.
7. *Christianity* Any of the three separate individualities of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as distinguished from the essence of the Godhead that unites them.
8. *Grammar*
a. Any of three groups of pronoun forms with corresponding verb inflections that distinguish the speaker (first person), the individual addressed (second person), and the individual or thing spoken of (third person).
b. Any of the different forms or inflections expressing these distinctions.
9. A character or role, as in a play; a guise: *"Well, in her person, I say I will not have you" (Shakespeare).*
http://www.thefreedictionary.com/person [accessed 2 September 2013]

(D2) 'God the Son' is God (*or* Jesus is God)[14]
and
(D3) 'God the Spirit' is God

In these statements there are two possible different senses of 'is': the 'is' of numerical identity and the 'is' of generic identity.

4.1 The 'is' of numerical identity

This joins together two proper names and asserts that the individuals identified by those names are one and the same. For example 'Clark Kent is Superman' tells us that the individual known as Clark Kent is one and the same as the one known as Superman.

The 'is' of identity demands that the entity referenced by each side of the 'is' is the same kind of thing. If we say that 'the Father is Yahweh' and 'the Son is Yahweh', then the Father *must be* (the same individual as) the Son. If Clark Kent is Superman and Kal-el is Superman then Clark Kent *must be* Kal-el (as indeed he is).

If (D2), for example, claims numerical identity, it should read
(D2) Jesus is Yahweh
because Yahweh is the proper name for the one God of Israel and Christianity.

Sometimes trinitarian apologists try to claim that Jesus is God in this sense. For instance it is a standard of trinitarian apologetics that that in the 'I am' statements in John (e.g. John 8.58), Jesus is claiming to be Yahweh. James White, in the 'Deity of the Messiah' debate with Anthony Buzzard and Joseph Good, claims on two occasions that Jesus is identified with Yahweh.[15] But most of the time trinitarian proof tends to use the 'is' of predication.

4.2 The 'is' of generic identity

The 'is' of generic identity (or predication or qualitative identity) joins a proper name with some sort of description, like an adjective or a descriptive noun, and states that the individual with that name has the property described. Thus, 'Clark Kent is clumsy' means that the individual with the name of Clark Kent often bumps into things, and 'Clark Kent is a journalist' means that this named individual writes newspaper articles for a living.

If (D2) (for example) claims generic identity with the 'is' of predication, it should read
(D2) Jesus is divine
or
(D2) Jesus is a divine being
or
(D2) Jesus is a god

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[14] That 'God the Son' is the same 'Person' as Jesus is of course a major trinitarian step, which a trinitarian would try to prove by identifying Jesus with the supposedly pre-existent individual of (say) John 17.5 who existed with 'the Father' before Jesus was born.

[15] Deity of Messiah debate between trinitarians James White and Michael Brown and unitarians Anthony Buzzard and Joseph Good, chaired by Jonathan Bernis, *Jewish Voice Ministries International*, Phoenix, Arizona, 2010. White states on at least two occasions that the New Testament teaches that Jesus is explicitly identified as Yahweh, referring to Heb. 1.10-12 and Rev. 5.13f.
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GqAkheDmQuE [accessed 16 July 2013]

Most trinitarian apologetics consists in trying to prove the first version, that each Person is divine (Jehovah's Witnesses would tend to focus more on the other two versions). The general argument is that these hypothetical Persons must indeed be truly divine, because the Bible describes them as doing the things that God alone can do. Note that this argument depends upon the assumption that these eternal 'Persons' really do exist.

Thus, in the case of Jesus, the trinitarian task is to prove that Jesus is God in the generic sense of being divine. This is done by pointing out the miracles he did, the sins he forgave etc. and saying "Only God could do that". A major problem with generic identity is that *the Bible really only uses numerical identity when applied to God*. When somebody says (truthfully) 'I am God', it would have to be Yahweh talking. When it is said of someone that he is God, it is that he is Yahweh. There is no talk in scripture about Godhead or divinity as a nature that could be shared between three distinct Persons. There is no talk of divine nature at all, unless it is that divine nature which adopted children of God can also partake of (Colossians 2.10, 2 Peter 1.4).

The fourth century Nicene theologians who attempted to define the Trinity used the 'is' of predication when they said that the Son is of the same 'substance' (Greek *homoousios*) with God (meaning a supposed First Person 'God the Father'). The Cappadocian Fathers were keenly aware of the hazards. On one side was the danger of Sabellianism (modalism), where the distinctness of the Persons is lost, and all three are seen as just appearances of the one God. On the other side was the danger of tritheism, where the unity of the Persons is sacrificed, and all that is left is three separate 'gods'. They hoped to steer a course between these two dangers. They decided *hypostasis*, meaning 'person' or 'property-bearer', was the term needed to express the idea that the Persons were distinct. The Persons were to be different *hypostases* while sharing the same *ousia*, giving the formula

eis Ousia, tres Hypostases

A common analogy used is of three men, Peter, Paul and John, sharing the same human nature. This seems plausible enough at first glance. Yet Peter, Paul and John are three separate humans and their common nature of humanity is not enough to provide any principle of unity which enables us to say that they are really one 'anything'. They are just three distinct human beings.

Likewise, if one tries to explain the Trinity by saying that it (or they) are three divine individuals sharing the common nature of divinity, then they are three gods. It is really no different from talking about the mythical Greek gods Zeus, Apollo and Hermes. Just as Peter, Paul and John are three separate persons with nothing binding them together except their common humanity, Zeus, Apollo and Hermes are three separate gods. They are not 'one' anything, because there is no principle of unity that binds them together aside from their common divinity. Furthermore there is no reason why Zeus, Apollo and Hermes could not be joined by Hera, to make four gods, just as the three men could be joined by another man, James. A property cannot include in its meaning how many individuals possess that property!

In conclusion, it can be seen that claims of generic identity mean something *quite different* from numerical identity. However trinitarian proof consists in a mixture of the two.[16] Numerical identity and generic identity considered separately are equally unpalatable for the Trinity. For instance, if Jesus were numerically identical with Yahweh, then Jesus would be the whole Trinity. If each Person were generically identical with God, then each is divine; so if they are distinct there are three gods. It is perhaps only the *mixture* of numerical and generic identity in trinitarian proofs that hides the problem.

5. Example: the 'Shield of the Trinity'

The traditional 'Shield of the Trinity' diagram is often used as a compact depiction of the doctrine of the Trinity. It combines the statements that each of the Persons are themselves identical to God with assertions of the distinctness of the Persons.
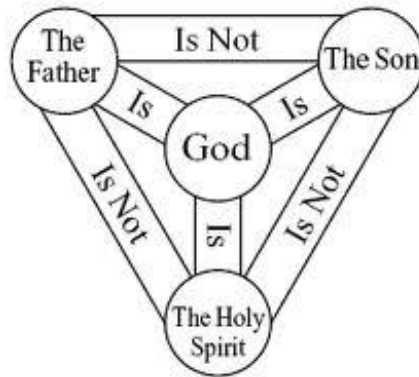
The diagram is a good illustration of the conflation between 'is' of numerical identity and 'is' of predication. The 'is not' statements use the 'is' of numerical identity in asserting that e.g 'the Father' is not the same individual as 'the Son', as in for instance the statement 'Superman is not Lex Luthor'. So far, so good. The real confusion lies in the statements 'The Father is God' etc. If the 'is' in these statements is the 'is' of (numerical) identity, then they are saying that 'The Father is Yahweh (proper name)'. *This is outright contradiction*. There *cannot* be three individuals who are distinct from each other, and yet who are each the same individual.

If, however, the 'is' in 'the Father is God' is that of generic identity (predication), then there is no contradiction. 'The Father is God' means that the Father is divine, as we might say 'Clark Kent is clumsy' or 'Clark Kent is a reporter'. There is no contradiction in saying that there are three distinct Persons, each of whom is divine, just as there can be many clumsy people or reporters. The problem with this, from a trinitarian point of view, is that saying that there are three distinct Persons who are each divine is the same as saying there are three gods. Therefore the only way of interpreting this diagram which avoids contradiction is to

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[16] For instance James White says at one point in the Deity of Messiah debate that there is "one name Yahweh describing each of the three Persons". This confuses numerical identity with generic identity. A proper name cannot 'describe' an individual.
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GqAkheDmQuE [accessed 16 July 2013]

understand it as showing three gods. This fact is hidden by the conflation of the two senses of 'is'.

6. Confusion over 'Being'

Many trinitarian definitions suffer from confusion over the use of the word 'being'. The word used as a noun has several different meanings of which the following three are relevant to the definition of the Trinity:[17]
1) 'being' as something that exists, substance, individual, property-holder, subject;
2) 'being' as person e.g. 'John is a human being';
3) 'being' as essence or nature e.g. 'John and Paul have the same being', meaning that they both have the property of being human, having a human nature.

These multiple senses of 'being' appear to derive from the ambiguities in the terms *ousia* (Greek) and *substantia* (Latin) which were used in the original fourth century definitions.

It would be a gross mistake to use the same word twice in a statement or definition, when the word is used in different senses. Yet this seems to be the case with attempts to define the Trinity using 'being'. This is shown in the example of a trinitarian definition given above:
(A) God is one Being
(B) There are (exactly) three Persons in this one God
(C) The Persons are distinct from each other
(D) Each Person is God
(E) The Persons share the Being of the one God

Trinitarians claim that this statement is a clear and simple definition. However we can see the sleight-of-hand involved in using the word 'being', as (A) and (E) use different meanings of 'being'.

(A) God is one Being
This must be Meaning 1), 'something that exists'. It cannot be Meaning 2), 'person', because according to the Trinity God is not one person but three. However there is the overtone of Meaning 2), ie that God is a person, has a consciousness, mind etc. of His (or Its or Their) own, without actually saying so explicitly. Saying that 'God is one Being' allows the definition to *appear* like it fits the God of the Bible, to whom numerous personal qualities and pronouns are ascribed.

(E) The Persons share the Being of the one God
This has to be Meaning 3), 'essence' or 'nature', for what else can be shared between three? This definition follows the original formulation of the Cappadocian Fathers. Yet this definition leads to the obvious conclusion that the 'essence' that the three Persons of the Trinity share is *divinity*, or the property of being the one true God.

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[17] The Collins English Dictionary entry for 'being' lists five meanings:
1. the state or fact of existing; existence
2. essential nature; self *she put her whole being into the part*
3. something that exists or is thought to exist, esp something that cannot be assigned to any category *a being from outer space*
4. a person; human being
5. (Philosophy) (in the philosophy of Aristotle) actuality
http://www.thefreedictionary.com/being [accessed 2 September 2013]

What else could be shared between three divine Persons? A trinitarian might say that the three Persons share the same 'Being' in the sense of sharing the same mind, consciousness etc. But, unless 'Person' is understood in the weak sense (see above), this would contradict the distinctness of the Persons as selves with their own centres of consciousness etc..

If the definition is rewritten without the word 'being', we might get something like this:
(A) God is one thing that exists
(B) There are (exactly) three Persons in this one God
(C) The Persons are distinct from each other
(D) Each Person is divine
(E) The Persons share the divine nature of the one God

This revised definition now seems to be clear. However, all it seems to convey is that there is one God, who is a *collective* composed of three individuals who share the same divine nature. For example a platoon might be defined as a collective of twenty six soldiers, all of whom share the same nature (of being soldiers). But a platoon does not have a collective personality because its constituents are persons.

That a Trinity defined like this is a collective of three divine individuals is obscured by the use of 'being', which slides between three different meanings and gives the false impression that a Trinity of three divine 'Persons' can also be some kind of divine individual as well.

7. Example: James White's definition of the Trinity

James White's definition and explanation of the Trinity provides an example of the use of 'being' in the different senses given above:

> Within the one Being that is God, there exists eternally three coequal and coeternal persons, namely, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit … we are talking about one *what* and three *who's*. The one *what* is the Being or essence of God; the three *who's* are the Father, Son and Spirit.[18]

White's definition conflates the three meanings of 'Being': '... the one Being that is God' uses 'being' in the senses of 1) something that exists and 2) an individual. 'The one *what* is the Being or essence of God ...' uses 'Being' in the sense of 3) 'essence' or 'nature'.

White expanded on this definition in his rebuttal of unitarian Anthony Buzzard on his *Dividing Line* podcast, where he relies again upon the distinction between 'being' and 'person':

> "We are not talking about three Persons that are one Person or three Beings that are one Being ... We differentiate between the words being and person ... The Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Spirit. These are distinct individuals. We see this by what they do and by their relationships with one another. Yet they fully share the one Being that is God"[19]

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[18] James White, *The Forgotten Trinity* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1998), pp.26-27.
[19] James White, *The Dividing Line*, 13 August 2013

White implies the analogy between humans and the 'Persons' is self-explanatory and obvious. But if it is obvious, the only conclusion is that the Trinity is three separate gods who share a common (divine) nature. If three distinct human individuals are three men, then three distinct divine individuals are three gods.

8. Philosophical defences of the Trinity

Theologians and philosophers have tried different approaches to try to avoid this seemingly inescapable dilemma between modalism and tritheism. Three such are the 'relative identity' approach, the 'social Trinity' and the 'divine mystery' defence.

8.1 Relative identity

The first approach would redefine identity to make it relative to the kind of thing being talked about. Thus it would be claimed that 'The Father is the same divine Being as the Son, but is not the same Person as the Son'.[20] It seems that tritheism is avoided by the first statement, and modalism by the second. Can the problem of the Trinity be solved as easily as this? There are at least two problems with the relative identity 'solution'.

1) The redefinition of identity abolishes common sense notions of what it means for one thing to be the same as another. Saving the Trinity is achieved at the cost of never again being able to say that one individual was or was not the same as another.

2) There is no distinction in scripture between 'being' and 'person', and no evidence that the writers of both Old and New Testament meant anything like this when writing about God. The only biblical context for 'X is God' is *simple numerical identity*, when Yahweh declares that he alone is God, or that the gods of other nations are not God. First century Christians did not need sophisticated philosophy to talk correctly about God and Jesus. But if they could talk correctly then without these theories, why should we need them now?

8.2 'Social' trinitarianism

Various theories of 'social' trinitarianism have been proposed. These face up to the fact that that the Trinity is some kind of collective made up of three divine individuals. Some theories are more or less tritheistic[21] and others claim they are monotheistic because, even though there are three divine individuals there is still only one Trinity ('Trinity Monotheism').[22] The main problems with 'social' trinitarianism are that:

1) It is polytheistic at root ('Trinity monotheism' has to admit not three but *four* divine beings!).

http://www.aomin.org/aoblog/index.php/2013/08/13/today-on-the-dividing-line-response-to-anthony-buzzard-and-more/ [accessed 15 August 2013].

[20] See e.g. Peter van Inwagen, 'And Yet They Are Not Three Gods But One God', in his *God, Knowledge, and Mystery* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), pp. 222–59, cited in Dale Tuggy, 'Trinity', *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, 2013 http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/trinity/ [accessed 19 December 2013].

[21] See e.g. Richard Swinburne, *The Christian God* (New York: OUP, 1994).

[22] See e.g. William Lane Craig (his Cerberus analogy is described above) , *Reasonable Faith* , Defenders Podcast Series 2: Doctrine of the Trinity (Part 7).   http://www.reasonablefaith.org/defenders-2-podcast/transcript/s5-7 [accessed 13 July 2013].

2) The Bible has to be rewritten to change God from an 'I' to a 'We'.

3) No longer could we say (e.g.) that God created the world. [23] Actions the Bible attributes to God would now have to be delegated to one of the three Persons, again prompting a rewrite of the Bible.

4) There is the problem of 'diminished divinity'. The Persons are not fully God, but only divine in the sense in which any property or plan of God is divine. Thus, for instance, they are hardly worthy of worship.

8.3 'Divine mystery'

The 'divine mystery' defence is along the lines that the doctrine of the Trinity can accepted because it is just a 'merely apparent contradiction', rather than something that must be rejected because it is self-contradictory or unintelligible.[24] Scriptural examples of this might be the apparent contradictions between the sovereignty of God and individual free will, or between monergism (God does it all) and synergism (God and the believer co-operate) in the work of salvation. In these examples there appear to be plain teaching or clear examples on both sides of the issue. Therefore, we might conclude, we must regard the contradictions as 'merely apparent', and conclude that the truth in some way transcends these opposing positions.

However the case of the Trinity is not like that. There is no clear scriptural teaching of the supposed 'threeness' of God, to put against the thousands of instances where God speaks and acts as an 'I', a single personal subject. The best that could be mustered would be Matthew 28.19 and 2 Corinthians 13.14, along with the notorious trinitarian forgery of 1 John 5.7 (KJV), and these do not constitute anything like clear teaching of the threeness of God. The rest is inference from the alleged deity of Christ, which again lacks any clear teaching. If either the Trinity or the deity of Christ had been taught in the apostolic church, there would have been some mention of those doctrines in the preaching recorded in Acts, and there is none.

Short of doing away with the God of the Bible, who speaks and acts as an 'I', or completely redefining common sense ideas of identity, the conclusion is inescapable. Three distinct divine individuals are three gods.

9. Conclusion: no middle way

Having rejected philosophical attempts to resolve the problem of the Trinity, we summarise the arguments given above. Recall the specimen definition of the Trinity is as follows:

(A) God is one Being
(B) There are (exactly) three Persons in this one God
(C) The Persons are distinct from each other
(D) Each Person is God

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[23] Daniel Howard-Snyder makes this and other criticisms of William Lane Craig's Trinity Monotheism. See Daniel Howard-Snyder, 'Trinity Monotheism', *Philosophia Christi*, 5(2), 2003, pp. 375–403.

[24] See e.g. James Anderson, *Paradox in Christian Theology: An Analysis of Its Presence, Character, and Epistemic Status* Paternoster Theological Monographs (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007).

(E) The Persons share the Being of the one God

The key terms 'Person', 'is God' and 'Being' are each ambiguous. These ambiguities cover up the confusions and the contradictions in the doctrine.

The ambiguity in 'Person' is between a 'weak' sense as a sort of mode or appearance, and a 'strong' sense, truly distinct individuals with their own consciousnesses, memory, will etc. In the former case the result is modalism, where the Father, the Son and the Spirit are one and the same individual, the one God manifested in different ways. But the classical Trinity defended today by apologists needs three 'Persons' in a 'strong' sense, because the Son has to have a consciousness and memory that is distinct from 'the Father'.

The ambiguity in 'is' God' is in **(D) Each Person is God**. This could mean either that each Person is Yahweh, a statement of numerical identity, or that each Person is divine, a statement of generic identity.

(D1) Each Person is Yahweh
If each Person is Yahweh, then all three Persons must logically be the same individual. This would contradict three distinct 'Persons' in the strong sense, and thus would only be consistent with a weak sense of 'Person'. The result is modalism.

(D2) Each Person is divine
If each Person is divine in the sense of sharing the same divine nature, then it would imply that the Persons have to be distinct in the strong sense, i.e. three different individuals (it would be nonsense to say that an appearance or mode of God is actually divine). The result is tritheism.

The ambiguity in 'Being' concerns **(A) God is one Being** and **(E) The Persons share the Being of the one God.** These statements are the legacy of past attempts to try to give a principle of unity which ties together three distinct Persons. The meaning of 'Being' in (A) must be 'individual, something that exists'. The meaning of 'Being' in (E) must be something that can be shared between different individuals, i.e. 'essence' or 'nature'. In reality the two statements contradict each other. One individual cannot also be three individuals, but this contradiction is hidden by the ambiguity of 'Being'. It is as if there is the assumption that the use of a word in two different ways somehow obtains access to some deeper reality in which the two different meanings of the word combine together to reveal some mysterious truth.

The table below summarises these conclusions.

Results of different interpretations of trinitarian definitions

	NUMERICAL IDENTITY *'The Father is Yahweh'* *'The Son is Yahweh'* *'The Spirit is Yahweh'*	GENERIC IDENTITY *'The Father is God'* *(meaning divine)* *'The Son is God'* *'The Spirit is God'*
PERSONS IN 'WEAK' SENSE PERSONAL WAYS OF MANIFESTING (MODES)	**MODALISM** One God manifesting in three personal ways ('Yahweh is the Father' etc.)	**IMPOSSIBLE** A mode cannot possess an attribute
DISTINCT PERSONS IN 'STRONG' SENSE DIFFERENT INDIVIDUALS	**CONTRADICTION** Three distinct individuals who are the same individual	**TRITHEISM** Three distinct divine individuals

There is no definition of the doctrine of the Trinity which avoids contradiction and does not result in either modalism or tritheism.