

Heaven & hell, and
the problem of the
trinity

Today we'll be finishing our discussion of the theological paradoxes, and we'll be discussing two quite different paradoxes. One is quite recent - Sider's "Hell and vagueness" - and the other is almost as old as Christianity - the problem of the trinity.

Sider's aim is to present a paradox involving a series of claims which, from the point of view of standard theistic views about the afterlife, seem quite plausible. These are:

Dichotomy: there are exactly two states in the afterlife, heaven and hell.

Badness: people in hell are very, very much worse off than people in heaven.

Non-universality: some people go to heaven, and some to hell.

Divine control: it is up to God who goes to heaven and who goes to hell.

Proportionality: justice is proportional, in the sense that it "prohibits very unequal treatment of persons who are very similar in relevant respects."

Justice: God's judgement about who goes to heaven & hell is just.

By Non-universality and Divine control, it follows that God decides that some people - call them group A - go to heaven and that some other people - group B - go to hell. By Badness, it follows that group A is much better off than group B. By dichotomy, it follows that every human being is either in group A or group B. By Proportionality (given that the people in group A are much, much better off than the ones in group B), it follows that if God is just, there must be some way of dividing people into groups A and B which does not place people who are relevantly very similar into different groups. So by Justice, it follows that there must be some way of dividing people into groups A and B which does not place people who are relevantly very similar into different groups.

The problem, Sider thinks, is that there is no such way of dividing up the population of people; however we decide to divide up people into Groups A and B, we're going to end up putting relevantly very similar people into different groups. If Sider is right, and if the informal argument just given is valid, it follows that one of the six theses with which we began must be false. But it is very hard to see, from the point of view of standard forms of Christianity, at least, how any of these theses **could** be false.

To respond to Sider's paradox, it suffices to find **some way of dividing people into groups A and B which does not place relevantly similar people into different groups**. Let's consider some candidates.

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First possibility: God decides on the **goodness of the person’s life**; this involves the number of good, and the number of bad, things that the person does. What does Sider have to say about this possibility?

Second possibility: God decides on the basis of the person’s **faith**; whether or not they believe in God (or believe some collection of things about God). Does this avoid the problems with the reliance on good works?

Can one object to Sider’s argument that salvation is a gift from God, rather than something that is earned by the person saved? Would this help resolve the paradox?

What if we say that “borderline cases” - people who don’t clearly merit either heaven or hell - go to purgatory? Does this help?

There are two worries about the use of purgatory to solve the problem, which correspond to two different conceptions of purgatory. First, suppose that everyone in purgatory eventually goes to heaven (this is the standard Catholic view). Then in deciding who goes to heaven, who to hell, and who to purgatory, God is deciding who eventually goes to heaven and who eventually goes to hell - which means that again we need some way of dividing the “borderline cases” from those who go to hell.

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On the other hand, if not everyone goes to heaven - and some are sent from purgatory to hell - Sider’s problem re-emerges as a problem about how God decides what happens to those in purgatory. Is there any reason to think that it would be easier to divide people into Group A and Group B after time in purgatory than after life on earth?

Further, it seems that God must still find some way of dividing those that go to hell from those that go to purgatory - and this raises many of the same problems as the initial division into heaven & hell, since presumably those that are in purgatory are much better off (especially since they have at least some chance of making it to heaven) than those in hell.

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A final reply which Sider considers involves denying that God’s justice must be proportional; he suggests that one might find some support for this idea in Matthew’s parable of the workers in the vineyard:

For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard. About the third hour he went out and saw others standing in the market-place doing nothing. He told them, “You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right. So they went. He went out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour and did the same thing. About the eleventh hour he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, “Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?” “Because no one has hired us,” they answered. He said to them, “You also go and work in my vineyard.” When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, “Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.” The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came and each received a denarius. So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. “These men who were hired last worked only one hour,” they said, “and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.” But he answered one of them, “Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?” (Matthew 20: 1-15 (NIV)).

Is the landowner in the parable unjust for giving those who worked much less the same reward as those who worked much more?

The landowner seems to defend his action by saying that he was not unjust to the people who worked all day - for they got what they were promised - and was simply generous to those who worked less. But, the landowner seems to think, being generous to some but not all is not the same as being unjust to some; generosity to A but not B need not imply injustice done to B.

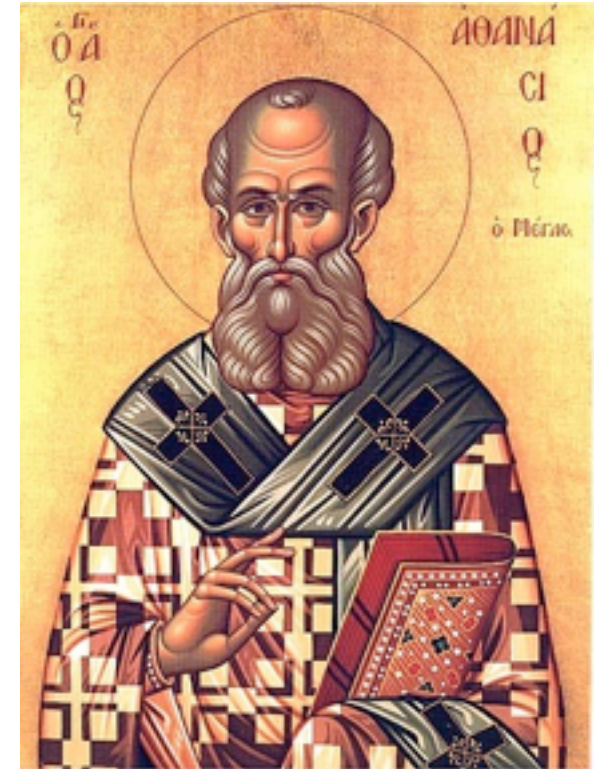
Is the landowner right about this? How might the landowner’s view be adopted to the case of heaven & hell? Would it change the story if the people to whom the landowner was **not** selectively generous were suffering, rather than simply recipients of a promised wage? And would it matter if there was no bound on the amount of money which the landowner had to disburse to workers?

Let's turn now to a logical paradox which arises, not for theism in general, but for Christianity in particular: the **paradox of the trinity**. Today we'll only have the chance to introduce the difficulties this doctrine involves.

A classic statement of the doctrine of the trinity is given in the 4th century Athanasian Creed, which (as its name suggests) is traditionally attributed to St. Athanasius.

And the Catholic Faith is this, that we worship one God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity. Neither confounding the Persons, nor dividing the Substance. For there is one Person of the Father, another of the Son, and another of the Holy Ghost. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Ghost is all One, the Glory Equal, the Majesty Co-Eternal. Such as the Father is, such is the Son, and such is the Holy Ghost. ...

So the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Ghost is God. And yet they are not Three Gods, but One God.



St. Athanasius

This statement seems to imply the following claims:

- (1) The Father is God.
- (2) The Son is God.
- (3) The Holy Spirit is God.
- (4) The Father is not the Son.
- (5) The Father is not the Holy Spirit.
- (6) The Son is not the Holy Spirit.
- (7) There is exactly one God.

The logical problem of the trinity can be thought of as the problem of understanding what (1)-(7) mean in such a way that they are neither inconsistent nor heretical.

One intuitively appealing understanding of (1)-(7) which does not solve this problem understands “is” and “is not” as expressing identity and non-identity. On this interpretation, (1)-(7) may be rendered as follows:

- (1) The Father = God.
- (2) The Son = God.
- (3) The Holy Spirit = God.
- (4) The Father ≠ the Son.
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Given the transitivity of identity, these seven claims are inconsistent.

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Hence it seems that we need some other interpretation of (1)-(7) which does not treat every “is” claim as an expression of identity.

One way of doing this, which has been more or less standard in the Western Church, is to, in effect, reinterpret (4)-(6). Here is what Aquinas says on this topic:

“From premises already laid down it follows that there are several divine persons. For then it was shown above that ‘person’ used of God means relation as a subsisting thing in the divine nature. It was also held that in God there are several real relations. Hence it follows that there are several subsisting beings in the divine nature. This means that there are several persons in God.” (*Summa Theologica*, 1a q. 30, article i)

Here it seems that the three persons of the Trinity are understood as three relations in which God stands to himself.

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In this view of the divine persons as relations, Aquinas was following Augustine, who compared the persons of the Trinity to different aspects of a mind:

“Who can understand the omnipotent Trinity? ... I wish human disputants would reflect on a certain three things in their very own selves. These three things are very different from the Trinity, but I say that people could well exercise themselves and test and sense how far distant they are from it. I am talking about these three things: being, knowing, and willing. For I am and I know and I will. In that I know and will, I am. And I know myself to be and will. And I will to be and to know. Let him who can, see in these three things how inseparable a life is: one life, one mind, and one essence, how there is, finally, an inseparable distinct, and yet a distinction.”

On the simplest way of understanding this view, (4)-(6) don’t express the distinctness of substances, but rather say that the three persons of the trinity are different relations in which God stands to himself - different aspects of the divine nature.

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But this is not quite the way that Augustine and Aquinas wanted their view to be understood; so put, it is the heresy of **modalism**, which says that the three persons of the trinity are simply three modes, or properties, of God.

One standard difficulty for understanding the view of Aquinas and Augustine is that it is hard to understand what their view could be, if it is not to be a form of modalism. One way to present this challenge to their view is as a challenge to articulate how the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit could be in some respect like relations or aspects but also genuinely distinct persons.

Both Aquinas and Augustine, intuitively speaking, begin with the oneness of God and try to explain what the distinctness of the divine persons could consist in. Let’s now turn to a different model, which begins with the distinctness of the persons and tries to explain the oneness of God.

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A natural thought is that the "is" in (1)-(3) does not express identity, but instead expresses **predication**, as it does in the following sentences:

Jeff is a person
Elyse is a person
Amelia is a person

Here we are not saying that I (and Elyse and Amelia) are identical with personhood, whatever that might mean; rather, we are saying that each of the three of us have a certain property: we are all persons. So interpreted, (1)-(3) do **not** contradict (4)-(6), which is good.

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But this obviously can't be the whole story, since, on this interpretation, (1)-(3) plus (4)-(6) contradict (7). To see this, consider the following collection of sentences:

Jeff is a person
Elyse is a person
Amelia is a person
Jeff is not Elyse
Jeff is not Amelia
Elyse is not Amelia

Fairly clearly, this collection of claims implies that **there are at least three persons**. But then, by analogy, (1)-(6) on our candidate interpretation would imply that **there are at least three gods**. This is the heresy of polytheism, and explicitly contradicts (7).

Let's turn, then, to a different interpretation of the "is" in claims (1)-(3).

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Rather than saying that (1)-(3) attribute the property of divinity to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one might say that these three claims say that (1)-(3) say, respectively, that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are **parts of the one God**.

In ordinary English, of course, we cannot (except when speaking metaphorically) use "is" to mean "is a part of." But that might, nonetheless, be a good way to understand the relationship between the three persons of the trinity and God.

However, there are some problems with this understanding of the Trinity. The first is simple: in general, the parts of a table are not tables; and the parts of a cat are not cats. So in what sense can we say that the parts of God are God, as we must on the present view?

The defender of this model of the trinity must say that the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit are God - are divine - in a kind of derivative sense. There is one God, and the parts of that God are divine in virtue of being parts of God.

The problem (as Rea points out) is that standard statements of the doctrine of the trinity seem to straightforwardly imply that the Father is divine in the same sense in which God is. For example, the opening lines of the Nicene Creed:

"We believe in one God, the Father almighty..."

This seems to be a serious problem for the view that the persons of the trinity compose God, as parts compose a whole. Let's turn to a final interpretation of the relationship between God and the persons of the trinity.

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Perhaps we can better understand this relationship by taking as our model not composition, but **constitution**. Consider, as Rea suggests, a sculptor who, out of some marble, makes a statue to serve as a column in a building he's constructing. It seems that, when he's finished, there is a clear sense in which there is just one substance - one thing - he has made.

But there is also a familiar sense argument for the conclusion that the pillar and the statue are distinct. After all, it might be true that the pillar could survive certain changes to the shape of the thing that the statue cannot.

Rea suggests that we should say about this case that the statue is distinct from the clay, and that the pillar and the statue are both substances - but that there is only one substance here.

If this makes sense, then one might think that the trinity can be understood in a similar way. One might think that just as the same bit of marble constitutes both the statue and the clay (which are genuinely distinct) so the divine nature might constitute the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit (which, like the pillar and the statue, would be genuinely distinct, and genuinely substances).

Nonetheless, if we can say of the statue/pillar that there is just one substance there, so we can say of the three persons of the trinity that they are just one substance: one God.

The problem is that it is not at all obvious that we can say this. The problem is similar to one discussed earlier: the following seems to be a valid form of argument:

x is an F
y is an F
x ≠ y

There are at least two F's

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But the constitution view of the trinity makes this invalid; after all, it says that the pillar is a substance, the statue is a substance, and that the pillar \neq the statue, but that there is just one substance there.

On the other hand, it may be that any view of the trinity which does not lapse into modalism is going to have to deny the validity of this form of argument. So perhaps this consequence of the constitution view is not a decisive objection to the view.