

BØHN ON PREDICATION OF DIVINITY

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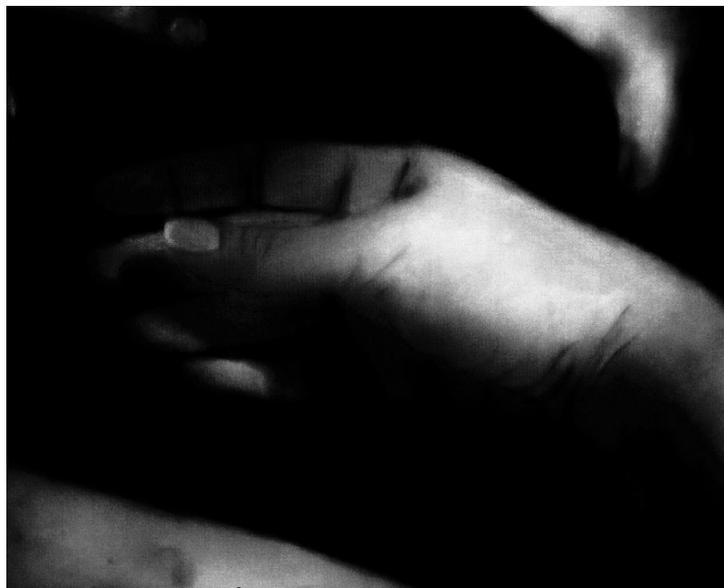
I.

In his paper *The Logic of the Trinity*, Einar Duenger Bøhn sets out to show that the orthodox Christian doctrine of the Trinity is logically coherent. One of Bøhn's claims is that Christian orthodoxy does not, as is sometimes supposed, ask us to believe that the three Persons of the Trinity, though (numerically) distinct from One Another, are all distributively identical to God.¹ Rather, he insists that in statements along the lines of "the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God; but the Father is not the Son, and the Son is not the Holy Spirit" – which are mainstays of Christian creeds – the "is" in "is God" should be read as an "is" of predication rather than an "is" of identity. That is, it should, according to Bøhn, not be read as saying that the Father, Son, or Holy Spirit are (distributively) identical to a certain object, namely God, but rather as imputing some sort of divinity property to each (Bøhn 2011; see also Tuggy (2013/2009: section 2.8) for a useful summary).

This reading has the virtue that it solves one of the Trinitarian problems Bøhn discusses: that such statements, if their instances of "is" are read as the "is" of identity, are in blatant violation of the transitivity of identity. I will argue, however, that Bøhn's reading appears to be implausible and that he does not do enough to challenge this impression. I will then suggest an answer on his behalf.

II.

Obviously, "God" – at least as used by Christians and other monotheists – is a singular term. Now, even if we say for the sake of argument that a predicate of the grammatical form "① is *a*" ("*a*" being any singular term²) need not have the logical form ①=*a*, such predicates surely *are* exclusive predicates – i.e., predicates whose logical form rules out the possibility of multiple instantiation.³ In other words, even



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if singular-term predicates are not always identity predicates, surely they are always exclusive predicates of some sort. That, after all, is what a singular term is meant to do: to pick out a single object. Thus, to say "this thing is God, and this other thing is also God," as Christian orthodoxy apparently does, is on the face of it incoherent, resting as it does on an apparent misunderstanding of the function of the predicate "is God" (and other singular-term predicates).

Bøhn's main argument that the instances of "is God" in the Athanasian Creed⁴ are not identity predicates (nor, presumably, exclusive in some other way) seems to be that they come at the end of a string of instances of the (non-exclusively) predicating "is":

Such as the Father is, such is the Son, and such is the Holy Spirit. The Father uncreated, the Son uncreated, and the Holy Spirit uncreated. The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, and the Holy Spirit incomprehensible. The Father eternal, the Son, eternal, and the Holy Spirit eternal. And yet they are not three eternals, but one eternal. As also there are not three uncreated nor three incomprehensible, but one uncreated and one incomprehensible. So likewise the Father is almighty, the Son almighty, and the Holy Spirit almighty. And yet they are not three almighties,

but one almighty. So the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God. And yet they are not three Gods, but one God. (Athanasian Creed, as quoted in Böhn 2011.)

This, he suggests, indicates that the instances of “is” in the “is God” predicates should also be read as the “is” of (non-exclusive) predication (367). However, I have difficulty seeing the strength of this argument. Take a statement like “George Orwell is an author, and Eric Blair is an author; George Orwell is English, and Eric Blair is English; and in fact, George Orwell is Eric Blair, and Eric Blair is George Orwell.” Would it be sensible to read the instances of “is” in that last conjunct as the “is” of (non-exclusive) predication, simply because the instances in the previous two conjuncts are? In my opinion: no. To my intuition, “George Orwell” and “Eric Blair” are singular terms. By analogy, then, since “God” is a singular term, the instances of “is God” in the quoted passage should not be read as the “is” of (non-exclusive) predication.

An objection to this reasoning might be to point to the Creed’s use of *analogy*. Locutions like “So the Father is God” seem to imply that the Father being God is analogous to His being almighty, incomprehensible, eternal, and so on – implying also, perhaps, that being God is no more a matter of being a particular object than is being almighty, incomprehensible, eternal, and so on. However, analogy is a matter of similarity, not total sameness, so to say that being God is analogous to being almighty is not necessarily to say that the two are the same in every way; it could well mean that they are only similar in some ways. Further, there is no guarantee that non-exclusivity is one of those ways. It is true that being George Orwell is analogous to being an author – among other things, the two have in common that they are both *properties* in a broad sense – but false that being George Orwell is no more a matter of being a particular object than is being an author.

Another objection would be to raise the possibility that the Creed is using “God” as a *sortal* term, the same way we use it when we note, e.g., that Thor and Freya are two distinct gods. One piece of evidence for this claim is the use of the locution “three Gods”. However, there are at least three things to be said against this objection. Firstly, regarding the use of “three Gods,” singular terms can sometimes also be used in this way: It is perfectly good English to say that Hannibal Lecter and Hannibal who crossed the Alps are not the same Hannibal, but two different Hannibals. Secondly, if “God” were being used as a sortal term in the Creed, that would seem to commit it to a sort of polytheism, which is of course wildly at odds with

the Christian orthodoxy it expresses. And thirdly, even if the Creed is using “God” as a sortal term, that still does not get us off the hook; for then the Creed is still saying that there is a single thing – namely the One God – that the three Persons all are.

III.

The intuition behind the thought that all three Persons’ being God is inconsistent with Them not being One Another, then, seems to be that any predicate of the grammatical form “ $\textcircled{1}$ is *a*” is exclusive. Is this true, though? We can certainly construct seemingly coherent and sensible theories on which it is not. Here’s one.⁵

Let us take “Socrates” as our example of a singular term. We might then speculate, taking up Quine’s (1948) famous suggestion, that the predicate “ $\textcircled{1}$ is Socrates” attributes the primitive property of *Socrateity* to its predicandum. Thus, taking $S\textcircled{1}$ to stand for “ $\textcircled{1}$ instantiates Socrateity,” the logical form of “ $\textcircled{1}$ is Socrates” would presumably be simply $S\textcircled{1}$. Now, it is obvious and even trivial that nothing about the logical form of this predicate rules out multiple instantiation: $\exists x\exists y(Sx \wedge Sy \wedge x \neq y)$ is not unsatisfiable. So the predicate is not exclusive.

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It might be objected that singular-term predication very often clearly *is* exclusive: “George Orwell is Eric Blair, so George Orwell and Eric Blair are one and the same” is obviously a valid argument. But the theory can easily be amended to account for this. Sometimes, we might say, the predicate “ $\textcircled{1}$ is Socrates” simply has the logical form $S\textcircled{1}$, while in other – and perhaps in most (but not, as we shall see, in all) – cases it has the logical form $\textcircled{1}=\iota xSx$.⁶ In other words, singular terms are distinguished from general terms, not by logical *form*, but by logical *context*: Unlike general terms, they are as a rule used with a (usually implicit) description operator. The point, again, is that the Socrateity predicate (and other singular-term predicates) does not in and of itself logically preclude multiple instantiation, though we can and do build such preclusion into statements in which it appears.

We are now free to say that the instances of “is God” in the Athanasian Creed use singular-term predication

in the first of the ways just outlined, without an implicit description operator. Thus, neither uniqueness nor transitivity is logically built into the predicate, and it seems logically possible for “① is God” to simultaneously apply to several distinct objects – to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, say. The logical coherence of the orthodox doctrine

of the Trinity is thus reclaimed.

On the contrary, though, we can cook up cases where singular-term predicates are intuitively not exclusive.

It might be objected that to deny the exclusivity of singular-term predication, even if not complete-

ly ruled out by the laws of logic or by our everyday use of language, seems desperately *ad hoc*. Besides, the objector might add, even if we do need to add a description operator to a singular-term predicate in order to make it exclusive, why think that such predicates are ever actually used without that operator? Again, isn't the point of a singular term precisely to pick out a single object? And in that case, why think the Athanasian Creed is using it without the implicit description operator?

On the contrary, though, we *can* cook up cases where singular-term predicates are intuitively not exclusive. Consider that any exclusive predicate is also transitive,⁷ so that any non-transitive predicate is non-exclusive. Therefore, if we find a case where singular-term predication is not transitive – that is, where *a* is *b* and *b* is *c*, but *a* is not *c* – then we have also found a case where it is not exclusive. And there are such cases.

CASE 1. In the 1970s and 1980s, Stephen King wrote some books under the pen name Richard Bachman. King has, of course, also published plenty of books under his real name, including *Carrie*. Thus, (1) Richard Bachman is Stephen King, and (2) Stephen King is the author of *Carrie*. But it does not thereby follow that (3) Richard Bachman is the author of *Carrie*.

CASE 2. Bruce Wayne is about to retire from his job as Batman, and asks Clark Kent, Superman's alter ego, whether he would like to take over. As it happens, Clark Kent is tired of being Superman

all the time, and his super-speed means that he will have the time and energy to commute from Metropolis to Gotham City, keeping his job as Superman while also doing a bit of Batmanning on the side. Thus, (4) Clark Kent is Superman, and (5) Clark Kent is Batman. But it does not thereby follow that (6) Superman is Batman.

Other objections could also be raised to the idea that the “is” in “Stephen King is Richard Bachmann” is an “is” of identity. For while it is clearly true that Stephen King is Richard Bachmann, we can use the Law of Indiscernibility of Identicals to disprove that the two are identical. For example, Richard Bachmann is arguably a kind of fictional character, something Stephen King is not.

Some authors have proposed to explain cases like these by adopting relativism about identity, which roughly has it that two things can be one and the same *F* and yet fail to be one and the same *G* (Lowe 2002:62–64). Thus, for example, it might be that Batman and Superman are one and the same person (identical-qua-persons), but not one and the same superhero (identical-qua-superheroes). The assumption, then, is one we have challenged: that the “is” of singular-term predication is the “is” of identity. Denying that singular-term predicates are exclusive, while radical, seems to me less radical than identity relativism. After all, identity relativism asks us to revise our understanding of the very nature of being, while my theory just asks us to revise our understanding of one part – viz., singular-term predication – of a small portion of being – viz., human language. It also seems to explain such cases just as well. This, I think, should be taken as another piece of independent evidence for the theory.

IV.

I have outlined Bøhn's interpretation of the “is God” predicates of the Athanasian Creed, and argued that it is unconvincing. I have then, on his behalf, outlined some views on singular-term predication which plug up this hole and which also, as far as I can see, are consistent with the essence of his proposal (which I think is a very promising one). Though I have only scratched the surface of what might be said for and against them, these views also seem to have at least some independent evidence in their favor.

NOTES

¹ Some things are distributively identical to a thing just in case each of them is, taken on its own, identical to that thing, and collectively identical to that thing just in case they are identical to that thing taken together. Thus, to steal one of Bøhn's examples, two shoes are (arguably) collectively identical to a pair of shoes, but not distributively identical to it.

² From now on, italicized lowercase Latin letters should always be read in this way, i.e. as stand-ins for arbitrary singular terms.

³ Obviously, all identity predicates are exclusive predicates, but it is less clear whether all exclusive predicates are identity predicates. For instance, it is not clear that definite-description predicates (e.g. “ $\textcircled{1}$ is the present King of France”) are identity predicates, though they certainly seem to be exclusive. On the Russellian view – a big-tent version of which I take to be the standard view nowadays – definite-description predicates have complex logical forms that involve but are not limited to the identity predicate. An even more clear-cut example might be a predicate of the form “ $\textcircled{1}$ is an element of the singleton set S.”

⁴ Following Bøhn (364), I take the Athanasian Creed as representative of Christian orthodoxy.

⁵ Note that the following theory is only an example. While it is a descriptivist theory, I am not sure that we need to be descriptivists in order to coherently deny that singular-term predication is exclusive. After all, an anti-descriptivist could claim that the logical form of a predicate like “ $\textcircled{1}$ is Socrates” is at least sometimes $R(\textcircled{1}s)$, where R is some relation other than the identity relation (cf. Lewis (1986: ch. 4) on transworld identity).

⁶ ι is a *description operator*, so that $\iota x\phi$ is read as “the x such that ϕ .”

⁷ The proof of this I take to be obvious.

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