

BØHN ON PREDICATION OF DIVINITY

A REPLY TO ELLINGSEN

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In my paper “The Logic of the Trinity” (2011), I argue that the problem of the trinity has a logically coherent solution in virtue of a generalized notion of identity. The problem of the trinity is this: God is said to be the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, but the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are said to not be each other, which seemingly entails a violation of the transitivity of identity. But I suggest that we should not read all of these as being claims of singular identity of the form “ $x=y$ ”, but as also being claims of (hybrid) plural identity of the form “ $y=xx$ ”, where ‘ xx ’ is a plural variable allowing pluralities as values. Plural identity claims are read collectively, not distributively, so when $y=xx$, y is identical with all of xx collectively, but not necessarily with each one of xx taken individually. So, on my suggestion, God is identical with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit collectively, but not individually, and the Father is not identical with the Son, who in turn is not identical with the Holy Spirit. This implies no violation of the transitivity of identity because God is not said to be any one of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

A minor “problem” with my suggestion is that there is a line towards the end of the Athanasian Creed, the Creed that states the original claims behind what has become known as the problem of the trinity, which seems to go against my suggestion. Here is the passage with the problematic claim towards the end:

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 eternal, but one eternal. As also there are not three uncrea-

ted 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.

Let’s call the next to last claim, namely that “the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God,” *the problematic claim*. My suggestion is that, since the problematic claim comes at the end of a chain of claims of predication, we should read it too as being a claim of predication, not identity. It is then saying something like that the Father, the Son and

the Holy Spirit are each one of them godly. After all, if they are said to collectively be God himself, then, of course, each one of them should be godly.

Sivert Thomas Ellingsen (2014) objects to my suggestion on the grounds that *simply* because the claims that comes before the problematic claim are claims of predication, it is not thereby *sensible* to read the problematic claim as a claim of predication (the italicized words are Ellingsen’s words). He gives the following as an example supposedly showing it not being thus *sensible*: 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. It is not sensible in this case to conclude that the last claims are claims of predication simply because the claims before them are claims of predication, so, by analogy, the same goes for the problematic claim in the Athanasian Creed.

But, I say in reply, the problem of the trinity is a problem of logical contradiction, and therefore in the end a problem of deep incoherence; so *something* has to go. The problem of George Orwell and Eric Blair on the other

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hand is not such a problem of logical contradiction or incoherence, so nothing really needs to go. Since the two cases are thus essentially different, the one need not reflect anything on the other. Now, I'm not exactly sure what Ellingsen means by "sensible," but it certainly seems "sensible" to me (on most understandings of the term apart from logical implication) to conclude that the problematic claim should be interpreted as a claim of predication, even if the claims of George Orwell and Eric Blair should not. After all, it comes at the end of a very poetic chain of such predications, and the alternative is logical contradiction and hence a deep incoherence. Note that all I need is that it is a *possible* interpretation of the creed, not that it is the only one; in fact I don't even need it to be the best one. The main point is to solve for the contradiction; the slightly awkward interpretation of the creed is just a minor cost worth paying, not a premise

in an argument. I never gave, nor do I have, an argument for reading the creed this way. A literal reading of the problematic claim is just what seems the most *sensible* to give up on pain of contradiction. The cost is minor because, given the poetic take on the creed, it does not seem to *violate* the creed, which is important to avoid simply changing the subject rather than solving for the contradiction.

Maybe Ellingsen's real complaint is that my take on the creed in fact violates it – and not just its letter, but its spirit. That's a legitimate complaint! The problem with it is that by accepting it one is left with a contradiction and hence a deep incoherence in one's worldview.

LITERATURE

Bøhn, E. 2011, "The Logic of the Trinity" *Sophia*, 50:3, 363–374.
Ellingsen, S. T. 2014, "Bøhn on Predication of Divinity", *Filosofisk Supplement*, 3, 42–45.

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