

REPLY TO BØHN

By Sivert Thomas Ellingsen

I thank Einar Bøhn for his reply to my “Bøhn on Predication of Divinity” (Ellingsen 2014). However, I am not convinced by it. Here’s why.¹

Bøhn points to an alleged disanalogy between what he calls the “problematic claim” and what I shall call the “Orwell claim”. Reading the “problematic claim’s” instances of “is” as instances of the “is” of identity, he points out, yields a logically incoherent statement, while a similar reading of my “Orwell claim’s” instances of “is” does not.

This is, of course, quite true, but I don’t see why the difference is relevant. Does Bøhn think that the logical incoherence of a proposition is, in itself, evidence against the claim that some particular utterance asserts the truth of that proposition? That can’t be the case, for there are obviously plenty of cases where it is perfectly OK to attribute incoherent propositional content to an utterance without ado. If Bob says, “it both is and isn’t raining,” there are many cases where we would naturally take Bob to be asserting that it both is and isn’t raining – even though this is a direct contradiction. I can only think of one case where logical incoherence would be evidence against a particular interpretation of an utterance. If we have a prior commitment to the coherency of the utterance (or some larger body of utterances of which it is a part), we obviously want to avoid readings that render it incoherent, even when such readings are otherwise reasonable. In the context of Bøhn’s defense, this would translate into a prior commitment to the coherency of orthodox Trinitarian doctrine, or of Christian orthodoxy more generally. However, since arguing from such a commitment would be blatantly circular in that context, this can’t be what Bøhn is getting at.

Alternatively, Bøhn could be making an appeal to charity. The idea might be that since it is less intellectually charitable to attribute incoherent content to an utterance than coherent, we should prefer coherent interpretations to incoherent ones.

In response, I note that charity has its limits. Clearly, we are sometimes permitted (or even obligated) to assume that an assertion is incoherent, so charity does not always require (or even permit) us to assume coherence. This, to

my way of thinking, is the rule rather than the exception: faced with an apparently incoherent assertion, we are, all else equal, entitled to assume that it *is* incoherent. If this is true, it is up to Bøhn to show that the apparent incoherence of the Athanasian Creed *is* merely apparent. Of course, this is what he tries to do in “The Logic of the Trinity” – but again, he does not to my intuition succeed.

In further defense of that intuition, I offer another argument by analogy, one which fixes the alleged fault in the original. I find it obvious that we should read “Eric Blair is George Orwell, and George Orwell is the author of *Homage to Catalonia*,” but

Eric Blair is not the author of *Homage to Catalonia*” as saying precisely what it seems to say – that $\text{Blair}=\text{Orwell} \wedge \text{Orwell}=\text{!x}(x \text{ wrote } \textit{Homage to Catalonia}) \wedge \text{Blair}\neq\text{!x}(x \text{ wrote } \textit{Homage to Catalonia})$ – even though this is

incoherent. Further, this seems to me to be true even if this statement should come at the end of (and be presented as analogous to) a long, poetic string of instances of the “is” of predication.

Bøhn might now point to a new disanalogy. In the case of the Athanasian Creed, he might say, we have an alternative interpretation that is both plausible and coherent – viz., the one he gives in “The Logic of the Trinity” – while no such interpretation is at hand for the second “Orwell claim”. But since the reasonableness of that interpretation is exactly what’s at issue, this, too, smacks of circularity.

I suspect that Bøhn’s apparent confusion about my “Orwell argument” has to do with his admitted confusion about what I mean by “sensible”. (In hindsight, I expressed myself less than clearly in the original article, so that confusion is entirely on me.) When I say that it is sensible to interpret a certain statement in a certain way, I don’t mean that this reading renders the statement itself sensible (and thus, presumably, logically coherent). Rather, I simply mean that it is the most natural or reasonable propositional content to impute to the statement, given the rules of the language, the context of the utterance, what we know about the intentions of the speaker, and so on. Thus, e.g., it is sensible to interpret Bob as

I suspect that Bøhn’s apparent confusion about my “Orwell argument” has to do with his admitted confusion about what I mean by “sensible”.

asserting that snow both is and isn't white, but not, all else equal, to interpret him as asserting (say) that all humans are mortal or that Oslo is the capital of Norway.

Again, my initial claim was roughly that it is always sensible to impute the propositional content that $a=b$ to any statement of the grammatical form "a is b" (where "a" and "b" are singular terms), at least all else equal. Against Bøhn, I argue that this rule holds even when such claims come at the end of strings of the "is" of predication by showing that every instance of "is" in the "Orwell statement" is naturally read as the "is" of identity, even when it comes at the end of precisely such a string. And again, I fail to see how the incoherency of the "problematic claim" on this reading of it should count against that reading or my argument for it.

LITERATURE

Ellingsen, S. T. 2014, "Bøhn on Predication of Divinity," *Filosofisk supplement*, 3, 42–45.

NOTES

¹Since neither Bøhn's reply nor the rest of my counter-reply makes this clear, I want to say here that I do not think that orthodox Trinitarian doctrine is incoherent, and that I am very sympathetic to Bøhn's account of the logic of the Trinity. I begin my original article with the critique that Bøhn and I discuss here, but end with a reply on Bøhn's behalf. In other words, Bøhn and I have reached substantially the same conclusions about the Trinity; we simply disagree about how to get there. (If anything, I go further than Bøhn, for not only do I think that orthodox Trinitarian doctrine is coherent – I also think it is true!)

Illustrasjon: Martina Mercellová

