

The Trinity: Relative Identity Redux¹

According to relative identity theories it is possible for objects x and y to be the same F but not the same G —where F and G are sortals, and x and y are G s as well as F s. Prima facie, relative identity looks like a perfect fit for the doctrine of the Trinity since it allows us to say that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, each of which is a Trinitarian Person, are the same God (or being) but not the same Person. Nevertheless, relative identity solutions to logic puzzles concerning the doctrine of the Trinity have not, in recent years, been much pursued. Critics worry that relative identity accounts are unintuitive, uninformative or unintelligible—and, in addition, that the most plausible relative identity theories do not circumvent the logical problems that the doctrine of the Trinity poses.

I suggest that the relative identity account is worth a second look and argue that it provides a coherent account of the doctrine of the Trinity. In section 1, I consider van Inwagen's relative identity account. In section 2, I discuss Trenton Merrick's response, according to which accounts like van Inwagen's should be rejected because relative identity is itself unintelligible. Relative identity theories, particularly those of the Geachean variety according to which absolute identity statements are ill-formed, are indeed problematic. I agree, however that Merricks has misidentified the problems and has not shown that relative identity accounts of the Trinity doctrine should be rejected. Michael Rea argues that even if relative identity is not unintelligible or otherwise objectionable it does not provide an acceptable account of the Trinity doctrine. I rehearse Rea's argument in section 3, and in section 4 show that it fails.

Relative identity accounts of the Trinity doctrine, like van Inwagen's, provide a basis for licensing the inferences we want and avoiding those that are incoherent or theologically objectionable. Most importantly, they are metaphysically innocent and theologically noncommittal. This, arguably, is a virtue rather than a vice: whereof we cannot speak thereof we must remain silent.

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1 A relative identity solution: van Inwagen

The Christian doctrine of the Trinity is widely held by critics to be logically incoherent insofar as it is committed to both the distinctness of divine Persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and to monotheism. According to the Trinity doctrine each of the Persons *is* God. But assuming that there is just one God it seems to follow that Father, Son and Holy Spirit are identical—insofar as we understand identity as *the* counting relation. So we appear committed to

(1) The Father = The Son

However, since we assume that the Persons are distinct we seem committed to (2) as well:

(2) The Father \neq The Son

And so we have a contradiction.

One way of avoiding contradiction is by eschewing the language of strict identity. On *relative identity* accounts, which adopt this strategy, commitment to monotheism and to the distinctness of Trinitarian Persons is held to entail (3) and (4) rather than (1) and (2).

(3) The Father is the same Being as the Son¹

(4) The Father is not the same Person as the Son

Predicates of the form *__ is the same F as __*, where *F* is a sortal term, are *RI (relative identity) predicates*.² Statements in which they figure, like (3) and (4), are *relative identity (RI) statements*. Relative identity accounts of the Trinity replace absolute identities with relative identity statements. However replacing absolute identity statements (1) and (2), with relative identity statements is no improvement if such statements “split up” into property ascriptions and identities, as they do on the standard analysis of relative identity statements:

Standard Analysis: “*x* is the same *F* as *y*” should be understood to say “*x* is an *F* and *y* is an *F* and *x* = *y*”

On this account, we should understand (3) and (4) as (3’) and (4’) respectively:

(3’) The Father is a being and the Son is a being and the Father = the Son.

(4’) Not (the Father is a Person and the Son is a Person and the Father = the Son).

Since the Father and Son are Persons, (4') implies that the Father \neq the Son, so the contradiction is back. Given the Standard Analysis it is not possible that the Father be the same being as the Son but not the same Person. More generally, given the standard analysis, for any x, y , and any sortals, F, G , it is not possible that x be the same F as y but not the same G as y .

Every *relative identity theory* is committed to R and is, therefore, incompatible with standard analysis of relative identity statements.

R: it is possible for objects a and b to be the same F but not the same G , where (i) F and G are substantival predicates, designating kinds, rather than adjectival predicates and (ii) a is an F , b is an F , a is a G and b is a G

R specifies, first, that the predicates F and G be substantival, which is to say that ' a is the same F as b ' is relative identity statement, and ' a is not the same G as b ' is the negation of a relative identity statement. Where a predicate, H , is adjectival, ' a is the same H as b ' is not a relative identity statement at all—at least not one that asserts the identity of a and b —so the standard analysis of relative identity statements does not apply. It does not, on anyone's account, 'break down' into ' a is an H and b is an H and $a = b$ '. Where predicates are adjectival, the standard analysis does not preclude cases where we should say that a is the same F as b but not the same G as b since the identity of a and b is neither asserted nor denied. My toothbrush is the same color as the Golden Gate Bridge but not the same shape. That is to say, they have the same color property but different shape properties: identity, at least the identity of particulars, does not enter into the picture. R however says that it is possible that individuals be the same F but not the same G where ' a is the same F as b ' is a relative identity statement, and ' a is not the same G as b ' is the denial of a relative identity statement, and so is incompatible with the standard analysis of such statements.

Secondly, R says that it is possible for individuals to be the same F but not the same G in non-trivial cases. On anyone's account Mark Twain is the same person as Samuel Clemens but not the same number as Samuel Clemens because Mark Twain a.k.a. Samuel Clemens is not a number. Such cases are compatible with the standard analysis, according to which 'Mark Twain is the same number as Samuel Clemens' says that Mark Twain is a number and Samuel Clemens is a number and Mark Twain = Samuel

Clemens. And that is false—not because the identity fails but because the first two conjuncts are false. Mark Twain, a.k.a. Samuel Clemens, is not a number. In general, the standard analysis allows that *a* and *b* be the same *F* but not the same *G* in such trivial cases, where *a* and *b* are neither the same *G* nor different *G*s because they are not *G*s at all. **R** however says that even where *a* and *b* are *G*s, they may nevertheless be the same *F* but not the same *G*—that they may be the same *F* but *different G*s. So, once again, **R** is incompatible with the standard analysis.

Every relative identity theory assumes **R**. Some accounts, notably the relative identity theory originally proposed by Geach, reject absolute identity outright. These accounts, in addition to **R**, affirm **D**:

D: Statements of the form “*x* = *y*” are incomplete and therefore ill-formed. A proper identity statement has the form “*x* is the same *F* as *y*.”

Others, admit statements of the form “*x* = *y*” but deny that relative identity statements are reducible to them. Either way, relative identity theories reject the standard analysis of relative identity statements: all recognize the existence of sortal-relative identity relations that are not reducible to property ascriptions plus absolute identity.

If the standard analysis of relative identity statements is rejected, then (3) does not cash out as (3'), so it is not clear that (3) entails that the Father = the Son or, hence, that it is inconsistent with (4). But this, by itself, does not show the doctrine of the Trinity to be coherent. Even if (3) and (4) do not assert the identity and distinctness of Trinitarian Persons respectively, they may nevertheless be inconsistent in virtue of the meanings of the relative identity predicates “__ is the same Being as __” and “__ is the same [Trinitarian] Person as __.” **R** says only that there are *some* relative identity predicates, being the same *F* and being the same *G*, such that it is possible that *x* and *y* be the same *F* but not the same *G*. It does not say (absurdly) that this is the case for *all* relative identity predicates. Moreover, it is an extra-logical matter *which* predicates behave in this way: clearly a great many relative identity predicates do not. It is surely not possible for *x* and *y* to be the same dog but not the same animal—at least not in English or in orthodox biological theory.

For a relative identity defense of the Trinity doctrine, it is not enough to invoke **R**, which says only that *some* substantival predicates, *F*, *G*, allow for things being the same *F* but not the same *G*. We need to

show that “being” and “Person” can reasonably be understood to be such predicates. To do this van Inwagen, who has argued that relative identity can be exploited to develop a logically consistent account of the Trinity, provides an account of the difference between those pairs of relative identity predicates that allow same-*F*-different-*G* and those that do not in terms of the *relative dominance relations* amongst predicates:

Dominance: [A]n RI-predicate *I* dominates a predicate *F* (*F* may be of any polyadicity and be either ordinary or RI) if all sentences of the form ‘ $\forall\alpha\beta \rightarrow (F\dots\alpha \leftrightarrow F\dots\beta)$ ’ are true. We say that an RI predicate that dominates every predicate is dominant. (Van Inwagen, 2009: p. 230)

RI predicates may dominate other RI predicates. “__ is the same *F* as __” *dominates* “__ is the same *G* as __” if being the same *F* entails being the same *G*. *Dominant* RI predicates dominate all RI predicates so if “__ is the same *H* as __” is dominant, then being the same *H* entails being the same *F* for all sortals *F*. On this account, domination may be mutual, so it is possible that *being the same F* dominate *being the same G* and vice versa. Indeed, to reject **R** is precisely to hold that *all* RI predicates are dominant—that is, that for all *x*, *y* and sortals *F*, *G*, *x* is the same *F* as *y* if and only if *x* is the same *G* as *y*, where *x* is an *F* and *y* is an *F* and *x* is a *G* and *y* is a *G*. To embrace **R** is to hold that some predicates are not dominant.

According to the standard analysis, every relative identity predicate dominates classical identity: that is to say, for all sortals, *F*, if *x* is the same *F* as *y* then *x* = *y*. This is what relative identity theories deny. According to any relative identity theory there are some RI predicates that do not dominate classical identity. Van Inwagen’s defense of the Trinity doctrine relies on the assumption that the RI predicate *__ is the same being as __*, which figures in (3), is not dominant—and in particular, that it does not dominate *__ is the same Person as __*. If that is correct, then we cannot infer from (3), according to which the Father and the Son are the same *being*, that they are the same (*Trinitarian*) *Person*. And if this is so, then (4) is consistent with (3) and, to that extent at least, the doctrine of the Trinity can be coherently stated.

Relative identity, however, is at least mildly disreputable: it is, as Harry Deutsch notes, a “maverick” view that presents “a serious challenge to the received, absolutist doctrine of identity.” (Deutsch, 2007) Critics worry that relative identity is unintuitive, unintelligible and uninformative, and that it is, at least in its Geachean form, committed to some objectionable form of anti-realism. Some objections

to relative identity solutions to the Trinity puzzle therefore are, more broadly, objections to relative identity. So some critics, including Trenton Merricks, hold that because relative identity is in and of itself as objectionable it is a non-starter for any account of the Trinity. Others, including Michael Rea, hold that regardless of the merits of relative identity as such, it does not provide an acceptable account of the Trinity doctrine. We shall consider both kinds of objections in turn.

2 Merricks: against Relative identity

Trenton Merricks argues that relative identity is unintelligible and has consequences that are false:

[P]retend for a moment that the thesis of relative identity is true. So let's pretend, for example, that *being the same dog as* does not entail *being the same as* (i.e. *being identical with*). But then we must admit that we have no idea what the relation of *being the same dog* is supposed to be. And it seems that all alleged 'relative identity relations' are likewise unintelligible. (Merricks, 2006: 5)

Relative identity however does not however block intuitively correct inferences. If *being the same dog* dominates identity then the entailment goes through—it just doesn't go through by the logic of identity alone, but rather depends on the character of the RI predicate *being the same dog*. Even for Geach-style relative identity accounts, which reject classical identity, there are still ample entailments given that *being the same dog* is dominant, so that for every available predicate *F*, where *x* and *y* are *F*s, *x is the same dog as y*, entails that *x is the same F as y*. Assuming **D**, we cannot of course infer that $x = y$. Indeed, as Merricks notes, we cannot say that anything is absolutely identical with itself since on such an account the absolute identity predicate is not available. However, if *x* is a dog we can infer that *x* is the same dog as *x*. And, since *dog* is dominant, if *x* is the same dog as *y* we can infer that *x* is the same animal as *y*. We can infer also that if *x* is brown, weighs 70 pounds and prefers chasing cats to chasing cars, the same is true of *y*. We have everything else the Folk, who rarely use the language of absolute identity, could want. Given the richness of entailments it is hard to see what more could be needed for intelligibility: even if we don't have absolute identity, for all practical purposes, sortal dominance is just as good. Merricks has not shown that without absolute identity *being the same dog* or any other relative identity predicates are "unintelligible."

Merricks however is even less sympathetic to what he styles “attenuated” relative identity theories, which admit absolute identity, and does not think they provide an acceptable account of Trinitarian claims.

The attenuated relative identity theorist says that identity is relative only with respect to the Trinity...so *being the same God as* besides being undefined, turns out to be unlike paradigm cases of *being the same F as*, all of which involve absolute identity. In light of this, the objection that relative identity relations are unintelligible is even more compelling. (Merricks, 2006: 8)

Again, it is hard to get a grip on this objection. The difference between *being the same God* and what Merricks takes to be paradigmatic RI predicates is that *being the same God* is not dominant and, in particular, that it does not dominate *being the same (Trinitarian) Person*. But it does dominate a range of other predicates, e.g. *being omnipotent*, *being omniscient*, and *being the same being*. If the Father is the same God as the Son, it follows that the Father is omnipotent if and only if the Son is omnipotent, that the Father is omniscient if and only if the Son is omniscient and, for that matter, that the Father is God if and only if the Son is God. *Being the same God* does not however dominate *being the same Person* or any of the hypostatic properties that are characteristic of Trinitarian Persons individually. The Father is the same God as the Son but it does not follow that the Father is the same Trinitarian Person as the Son, or that the Father was crucified if and only if the Son was crucified, or that the Father begets the Son if and only if the Son begets the Son or that the Son is begotten but also unbegotten, insofar as the Father is unbegotten. Since *being the same God* does not dominate *being crucified*, *being begotten* and a range of other hypostatic predicates, a relative identity account can avoid Patripassionism, the doctrine that the Father suffered on the Cross, and a variety of other heresies and incoherent theological doctrines.

2.1 Dominance

This account however poses a question: what induces dominance? *Prima facie* it seems that without some principled way of determining dominance relations amongst predicates this solution to the Trinity puzzle is, at best, *ad hoc*. To solve the puzzle we announce that *being* does not dominate *Person* but rather that *Person* dominates *being*—hence that Father, Son and Holy Spirit are the *same being* but not the *same Person*. Without some principled way of accounting for dominance, the objection runs, this seems no

more than an unsubstantiated assertion. If Person dominates being but not vice versa, what makes that so?

This is, however, asking too much: dominance is theory-relative. The best we can do is give a principled account of *dominance in a theory* since, according to relative identity accounts, it is the resources of the theory in which sortal relative identity statements figure that determine dominance relations and license inferences.

Consider the stock case in which we might say that different passengers are the same person, e.g. that the occupant of Seat 6a on last week's flight to Baltimore is a *different passenger* from the occupant of Seat 17c on today's flight to San Diego, but the *same person*. Airline Theory is rich enough to distinguish between the occupants of those seats because its predicates include seat designators and the relation of legal seat occupancy. So we can say that persons are the same passenger if and only if they legally occupy the same seat on the same flight and, consequently, that 6a to Baltimore and 17c to San Diego are the same person but different passengers. Passengers on this account are people—not roles that people play or temporal parts of people—and that whenever you have the same passenger you have the same person. That is to say, *passenger* dominates *person*. But *person* does not dominate *passenger*. To be the *same passenger* you not only need to satisfy the conditions for *same person* (whatever they are): you also have to satisfy certain conditions concerning reservations and ticketing, flight times, destinations, and seat designations. 6a and 17c fail to meet those additional conditions and so are the same person but different passengers.

But passengers can only fail these conditions if they are available. Consider Airline Theory Minus, which lacks the resources to distinguish passengers by legal seat occupancy but is, in every other respect, like Airline Theory. Its ideology does not include any of the familiar customer service predicates, such as “reservation,” “confirmation number,” “ticket,” “flight number” or “seat”: in Airline Theory Minus the only predicates available for distinguishing passengers are those that distinguish persons. In Airline Theory Minus therefore dominance is mutual: *passenger* dominates *person*, and *person* dominates *passenger* so that whenever you have the *same person*, you have the *same passenger*. In Airline Theory proper, a richer theory that includes all the standard airline customer service predicates, *person* does not dominate

passenger since it has the resources to distinguish passengers by differences in legal seat occupancy, so that the same person may be different passengers.

In general, dominance depends upon the theory: on its stock of predicates and, most importantly, on its sortals, which convey *identity criteria*, that is, shortlists of conditions that are necessary and sufficient for the identity of objects of that sort. A sortal predicate *F* dominates a predicate *G* within a theory if the theory has predicates to distinguish individuals as different *G*'s that do not distinguish them as different *F*'s.

2.2 Theology and “Naturalness”

Relative identity does not provide any account of supra-theoretical or absolute dominance because on relative identity accounts there is no such thing: all dominance is dominance in a theory. Some theories have the resources to distinguish the same person as different passengers; others recognize different persons as the same “surmen,” where a pair of men are the *same surman* if they have the same surname, and a *surman* is a man who bears this relation to someone. (Geach, 1967) Relative identity does not adjudicate between theories: those that admit surmen or distinguish amongst passengers who are the same person, are as good as any others.

Intuitively, however, some theories are more “natural” than others. So counting by *person* seems to reflect distinctions in the world as it is apart from human interests and linguistic trickery in a way that counting by airline-theoretic *passenger* or by Geachean *surman* does not. Merricks, worries that relative identity accounts of the Trinity doctrine—van Inwagen’s in particular—are unintuitive or “unnatural.” And, he writes, “once we open the door to less-than-most-natural glosses [of Trinitarian claims]...there is—absent further argument—no reason to accept the relative identity gloss as opposed to some other.” (Merricks 2006: 7) Given the theological subject matter, however, it is hard to see how *any* account of the Trinity doctrine could be natural or intuitive. Our intuitions arise from extensive dealings with ordinary, middle-sized spatio-temporal objects, and have less purchase on other items—including abstracta and some of the extraordinary objects of fundamental physics. God is in any case *sui generis*. It should hardly be surprising if accounts of the Trinity doctrine and other theological dogmas are unnatural and unintuitive: divine properties are peculiar, and theology is speculative.

More to the point, it is not clear that the specter of competing accounts is a problem. In the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity we have what *appears* to be an inconsistent set of propositions. Is there some interpretation according to which all of them come out true? It seems so: *prima facie*, relative identity theories provide a model. If there are other models, so much the better. So van Inwagen writes, “I wish only to propose a way of stating that doctrine that can be shown to be free from formal inconsistency. Whether the doctrine so stated, actually is the catholic faith (which I mean to keep whole and undefiled) will be a matter for further discussion.” (Van Inwagen, 2009: 221) The aim of his relative identity account is not to produce an account of the Trinity doctrine that is natural, plausible or intuitive, or to expound the doctrine of the Trinity that figures as an essential component of Christian orthodoxy. The goal is just to show that the doctrine can be coherently formulated.

On this account there is no question of how we *know* that (*Trinitarian*) *Person* dominates *being* but not vice versa in Trinity Theory any more than there is a question of how we know *passenger* dominates *person* but *person* does not dominate *passenger* in Airline Theory. Dominance relations are just features theories possess in virtue of the predicates and identity criteria that figure in them. Trinity Theory features hypostatic predicates, including *begets* and *proceeds*, that distinguish divine Persons but not divine beings so in Trinity Theory the Father, who begets the Son, and the Son, who is begotten, are different Persons but the same being. The strictly monotheistic theories of other Abrahamic religions do not have the hypostatic predicates, which serve to distinguish Persons, and so they recognize only one divine Person.

In general, relative identity accounts provide explain how we should understand RI predicates *within a theory*. They do not purport to provide any means for selecting amongst theories. Relative identity merely provides a way of articulating the logic of Trinity Theory. Relative identity accounts do not address the separate question whether Trinity Theory is theologically superior to strict or non-Trinitarian monotheism. Relative identity accounts of the Trinity doctrine are, to that extent, metaphysically innocent. The worry that van Inwagen’s relative identity account is incomplete without a “supplemental story about the metaphysics underlying RI relations,” suggested by Michael Rea and others, is therefore beside the point (Rea, 2003: 251). Van Inwagen’s aim is just to show that the doctrine is logically coherent—not to

produce a substantive theology or theologically informed metaphysics. And that, arguably, is all that philosophers *qua* philosophers can do. Relative identity accounts have nothing to say about substantive theological issues—whether the Persons are distinct “centers of consciousness,” whether the Trinity *in toto* is in some sense prior to the Persons or vice versa, or more fundamentally whether Trinity Theory cuts along the theological joints in a way that alternative ways of understanding supernatural reality do not. They are theologically non-committal. And that, arguably, is a virtue.

3 Rea’s response to van Inwagen

While Merricks argues that van Inwagen’s account fails because it relative identity is unintelligible, Michael Rea argues that his project fails *on its own terms*—that even if we do not reject relative identity *tout court* van Inwagen has not shown the doctrine of the Trinity to be logically coherent. It is to this objection that we now turn.

Van Inwagen leaves it an open question whether classical (‘absolute’) identity exists. That is, his account is noncommittal about **D**. Rea argues however that if van Inwagen does not either endorse or reject **D**, his account is incomplete and he faces a dilemma: if he rejects **D**, his account of the Trinity doctrine is incoherent; if he endorses **D**, he is committed to an anti-realist metaphysics which is, Rea suggests, theologically unacceptable. I shall argue that we can safely grasp the first horn of the dilemma.

Let us say that a sortal *G* is *more general* than a sortal *F* if being an *F* implies being a *G*. So *mammal* is more general than *dog* since being a dog implies being a mammal. A sortal, *G*, is *maximally general* if, for all sortals, *F*, *x*’s being a *F* implies that it is a *G*. Rea suggests plausibly that *being* is a maximally general sortal “on a par with sortals like ‘entity’, ‘thing’, and object.” (Rea, 2003: 258) The claim is that, for any *x*, whatever else *x* is, it is a *being*: if *x* is a dog or a human, a quark, a galaxy, a set or (if there are such things) a number, a Platonic form, a geometrical point or a god, then *x* is a being.

More controversially (and, I shall argue, mistakenly), Rea holds that because *being* is maximally general, sameness of being is tantamount to sameness simpliciter—which, if absolute identity be admitted, is just absolute identity. “‘Being,’” he writes, “is plausibly the most general sortal, on a par with sortals like ‘entity’, ‘thing’, and ‘object’. Thus, ‘*x* is (absolutely) distinct from *y*’ seems to be synonymous with ‘*x* is not the same being (thing, entity, object) as *y*.’” (Rea, 2003: 258) The idea here, which Rea takes to be intuitive

and uncontroversial, is that the generality of a sortal induces the dominance of the relative identity predicate in which it figures. Rea thus assumes what may be formulated as the Generality and Dominance Principle—which it will be argued is false, given our understanding of generality and dominance:

Generality and Dominance Principle: If a sortal, *G*, is more *general* than a sortal, *F*, then the relative identity predicate “__ is the same *G* as __” *dominates* the relative identity predicate “__ is the same *F* as __.”

Rea appeals to the generality of *being* in support of the principle **P**, which follows from it, and on which his argument turns.

$$\mathbf{P}: \forall x \forall y (x \neq y \supset \sim Bxy)^3$$

Given **P**, however, (3) and (4) imply a contradiction. The argument is as follows:

Rea’s Trinitarian Incoherence Argument

- (3) The Father is the same being as the Son
- (4) The Father is not the same Person as the Son
- (5) The Father \neq The Son
- (6) The Father is not the same being as the Son.

If absolute identity is admissible then (5) follows from (4). Whatever is an *F* is the same *F* as itself so, since the Father is a Person, the Father is the same Person as the Father. The Son however is *not* the same Person as the Father, as (4) affirms, so the Father and Son do not have exactly the same properties. It follows that the Father is not strictly identical with the Son, hence (5). Given **P**, however, (5) implies (6) so we have a contradiction. Therefore, given **P**, which assumes that absolute identity is admissible, (3) and (4) cannot both be true. Thus, *given P*, if absolute identity, and so absolute distinctness, are admissible, the doctrine of the Trinity, which commits us to (3) and (4), entails a contradiction and so is incoherent.

4 Generality and Dominance: Rea is wrong

The crux of Rea’s argument is **P**. However he has not made the case that **P** is intuitively correct or that any intuitions we might have regarding **P** should be taken seriously, or that we have any other compelling reason to endorse it. “Being,” is a term of art and philosophical identity mavens’ intuitions about **P** may be corrupted by prior commitments to analyses of sortal relative identity statements that

relative identity theories reject. Moreover, there is no compelling reason to think that even uncorrupted intuitions about **P** are of any serious interest. “The doctrine of the Trinity,” as van Inwagen notes, “treats of objects extraordinarily different from the objects of ordinary experience, ones that are perhaps *sui generis*.” (Van Inwagen, 2009. pp. 235-6) Our intuitions may not have any purchase on fine points of theology. More importantly, and crucially, Rea’s serious, if exceedingly brief, argument for **P** rests on an assumption that should be rejected, viz. that the more general a sortal is, the more dominant any relative identity predicate in which it figures. If this principle were true we could conclude that, since *being* was among the most general of sortals, “*__ is the same being as __*” would dominate all predicates, including absolute identity. But there is no reason to assume that generality induces dominance and so no reason to endorse **P**.

On relative identity accounts sortals are understood as *derelativizations* of relative identity predicates, so that to be an *F* is to be *the same F* as something or other. Relative identity theories therefore assume the following account of sortal predication:

Sortal Predication: where *F* is a sortal term, *a* is an *F* if $\exists x (a \text{ is the same } F \text{ as } x)$

Relative identity statements are understood accordingly:

Relative Identity Statement: *a* is the same *F* as *b* if $\exists x (a \text{ is the same } F \text{ as } x \text{ and } b \text{ is the same } F \text{ as } x)$

This account captures the spirit of the standard analysis without commitment to absolute identity. As on the standard analysis, *a* is the same *F* as *b* only if *a* is an *F* and *b* is an *F*. But this account does not require that, in addition, $a = b$. It requires only that there be something or other to which *a* and *b* each bear the *same F* relation. Since relative identity relations are transitive, it follows that *a* is the same *F* as *b*, as desired.

G dominates *F* if being the same *G* implies being the same *F*. Given this account of relative identity statements, we can understand sortal dominance accordingly:

Sortal Dominance: A sortal relative identity relation, *being the same G as* dominates a sortal relative identity relation *being the same F as* if $\forall x \forall y ((\exists z x \text{ is the same } G \text{ as } z \text{ and } y \text{ is the same } G \text{ as } z) \rightarrow (\exists z x \text{ is the same } F \text{ as } z \text{ and } y \text{ is the same } F \text{ as } z))$.

If the *same G* relation dominates the *same F* relation, then whenever *a* is the same *G* as *b*, *a* is the same *F* as *b*. *Dominant* sortal relative relations induce relative identity relations under all sortals they dominate.

Sortal dominance should not be confused with sortal generality. *G* is more general than *F* if whatever is an *F* is a *G*. Given our understanding of sortal predication, sortal generality can be understood as follows.

Sortal Generality: *G* is more general than *F* if $\forall x (\exists y x \text{ is the same } F \text{ as } y \rightarrow \exists y x \text{ is the same } G \text{ as } y)$
That is to say, *G* is more general than *F* if *x*'s being the same *F* as something entails its being the same *G* as something.

Rea's Generality and Dominance Principle, which backs **P**, says that sortal generality induces sortal dominance so that where *G* is more general than *F*, being the same *G* implies being the same *F*.

Generality and Dominance Principle: If a sortal, *G*, is more *general* than a sortal, *F*, then the relative identity predicate " is the same *G* as " *dominates* the relative identity predicate " is the same *F* as ."

Given our understanding of sortal generality and sortal dominance however we can now recognize this principle as saying that from the assumption that whatever is an *F* is a *G*, that is,

$$(7) \forall x (\exists y x \text{ is the same } F \text{ as } y \rightarrow \exists y x \text{ is the same } G \text{ as } y)$$

we may infer

$$(8) \forall x \forall y ((\exists z x \text{ is the same } G \text{ as } z \text{ and } y \text{ is the same } G \text{ as } z) \rightarrow (\exists z x \text{ is the same } F \text{ as } z \text{ and } y \text{ is the same } F \text{ as } z)).$$

But (7) does not imply (8). Assume that *G* is more general than *F*, that is to say that if any object *x* bears the *same F* relation to some *y*, it bears the *same G* relation to some *y*—not necessarily the same *y*. Suppose *a* is an *F* and *b* is an *F*. Since *G* is more general than *F* it follows that *a* and *b* are *G*s. So there is something to which *a* bears the *G* relation and something to which *b* bears the *G* relation—which may, but need not be, the same something. Let us say that there is an object, *c*, which is the *same G* as *a* and the *same G* as *b*. It follows that *a* is the *same G* as *b*. Again, since *a* is an *F* and *b* is an *F*, *a* is the *same F* as something and *b* is the *same F* as something. But, once again, they do not have to bear the *same F* relation to the *same* object. So let us say that *a* is the *same F* as *d* and *b* is the *same F* as *e* where *d* ≠ *e*, and there is no object to which

both *a* and *b* bear the *same F* relation. If there is no such object then *a* is not the *same F* as *b*. So *a* is the *same G* as *b* but *a* is not the *same F* as *b*. Therefore, (8) is false: *G* is more general than *F* but *same G* does not dominate *same F*. So (8) does not follow from (7). And so, given our account of sortal generality and sortal dominance, the Generality and Dominance Principle is false.²

Without it however it is hard to see what reason we might have to endorse **P** short of assuming the standard analysis of relative identity statements, according to which *all* relative identity predicates imply absolute identity. *Given the standard analysis of relative identity statements however the detour through P is pointless!* The standard analysis by itself stops the Trinity doctrine cold: there is no point to any further negotiations concerning the generality of *being*, the structure of dominance relations or anything else. If **P** is not independent of the standard analysis then there is no point in bothering with it.

P, which is the crux of Rea's argument, is therefore, either superfluous or implausible. If we accept the standard analysis of relative identity statements, and therefore reject **R**, it is superfluous: on this account (3) and (4) are inconsistent, and that is the end of it. If however we reject the standard analysis then there is no reason to accept **P**, on which Rea's criticism of the relative identity account depends.

² For a concrete counterexample to the Generality and Dominance Principle, consider the global monetary system. Each nation, or supernational union, has its own currency. These currencies are in turn divided into denominations. Let us understand the denominations of bills as exclusive to a given currency—so that, e.g. a US \$5 bill and a Canadian \$5 bill are not bills of the same denomination. Being the same denomination therefore dominates being the same currency. However, since currency items subdivide into sets of bills of different denominations, being the same currency does *not* dominate being the same denomination: two bills may be the same currency but different denominations. So if two bills are the same denomination then they are the same currency but not vice versa.

Being a piece of US currency is *more general* than being a US \$20 bill, since whatever is a US \$20 bill is an item of US currency but not vice versa so:

$\forall x \exists y$ if *x* is the *same denomination* as *y* then *x* is the *same currency* as *y*

Given our understanding of sortal generality (9) says that *currency* is more general than *denomination*.

Now suppose *a* is a US \$1 and *b* is a US \$5: that is, they are bills of different denominations, but of the same currency.

(10) *a* is the *same currency* as *b*

If the Generality and Dominance principle were correct, it would follow that *a* was the same denomination as *b*, since *currency* is more general than *denomination*. But, in fact *a* is not the *same denomination* as *b*. Thus, while currency is more general than denomination, it does not dominate denomination. Indeed, assuming that a denomination is exclusive to a currency, it is denomination that dominates currency.

The Generality and Dominance Principle therefore fails.

5 Conclusion: Relative Identity Redux

Relative identity accounts of the Trinity doctrine are among the most promising attempts to make sense of the doctrine without either confounding the Persons or dividing the Essence of God the Trinity. On such accounts we hold that the Father is the same being (or the same God) as the Son but not the same Trinitarian Person and, consequently, that Father and Son have the same generically divine properties, but not the same specifically hypostatic properties, which are peculiar to the Persons individually.

Merrick's dismissal of relative identity is hasty: he has not shown that this account is a non-starter; and Rea has not shown that relative identity accounts fail to make sense of the Trinity doctrine. The Fathers of the Church, who concerned themselves with the Doctrine of the Trinity in the third, fourth and fifth centuries did not have the logical machinery that we have. If they had then, arguably, they would have given relative identity accounts a serious look. I suggest that we do likewise.

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¹ On some accounts, Father and Son are said to be “the same God.”

² A sortal is generally understood to be a +count noun that conveys (or borrows) a criterion for identity. Most importantly the current discussion, it is substantival rather than adjectival.

³ Hasker, who gives short shrift to the relative identity solution to the Trinity puzzle, endorses this principle without comment!