

## Sabellianism Reconsidered<sup>1</sup>

Sabellianism, the doctrine that the Persons of the Trinity are roles that a single divine being plays either simultaneously or successively, is commonly thought to entail that the Father is the Son. I argue that there is at least one version of Sabellianism that does not have this result and meets the requirements for a minimally decent doctrine of the Trinity insofar as it affirms that each Person of the Trinity is God and that the Trinity of Persons is God while maintaining monotheism without undermining the distinctness of Persons.<sup>2</sup>

### Martinich's Reducio

According to Sabellian accounts of the Trinity, the names of Trinitarian Persons designate roles that God plays either successively or concurrently. Sabellian accounts of the Trinity are thought to err through confounding the Persons, in particular by yielding the result that the Father is the Son.

A. P. Martinich reconstructs what he takes to be Sabellius' Argument as follows:

#### *Sabellius' Argument*

1. There is only one God
2. The Father is God.
3. The Son is God.
4. Therefore, the Father is the Son

There is a formal proof...in first order logic...

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| 1. $(\exists x)[Gx \cdot (y)(Gy \supset y = x)]$ |   |
| 2. $Gf$  |   |
| 3. $Gs$  |   |
| $\alpha. [Ga \ \& \ (y)(Gy \supset y = a)]$      | 1, existential instantiation.                 |
| $\beta. (y)(Gy \supset y = a)$                   | $\alpha$ , simplification.                    |
| $\gamma. (Gf \supset f = a)$                     | $\beta$ , universal instantiation.            |
| $\delta. f = a$                                  | 2, $\gamma$ , <i>modus ponens</i>             |
| $\epsilon. (Gs \supset s = a)$                   | $\beta$ , universal instantiation.            |
| $\zeta. s = a$                                   | 3, $\epsilon$ , <i>modus ponens</i>           |
| $\eta. a = s$                                    | $\zeta$ , symmetry                            |
| 4. $f = s$                                       | $\delta$ , $\eta$ , transitivity <sup>3</sup> |

Martinich concludes that the only way to get Trinitarian monotheism is by recourse to relative identity, the doctrine that there is no identity simpliciter but only sortal relative identity relations so that while the Father is not the same Person as the Son, the Father is nevertheless the same God as the Son.<sup>4</sup> The relative identity thesis is however controversial and, as Van Inwagen, who takes a similar tack, notes, does not seem to be motivated by anything other than the theological case. Arguably, however, theology should not drive metaphysics or philosophy of language. If so, then from the philosophical point of view, it is desirable to produce an account of the Trinity that does not require ad hoc philosophical commitments.

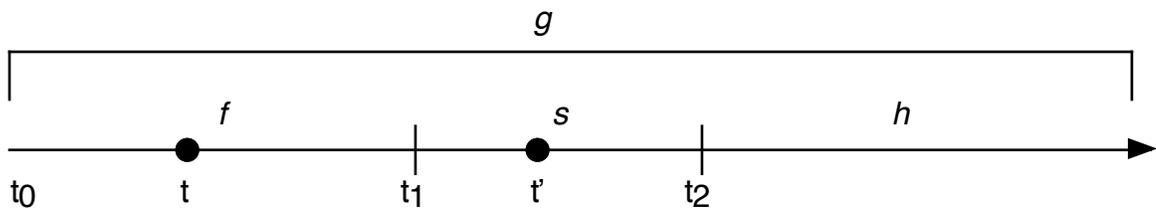
For theological purposes an account of the Trinity must (i) secure the distinctness of Persons, (ii) maintain monotheism, (iii) affirm that each the Person of the Trinity is God and (iv)

affirm that the Trinity of Persons is God. Arguably Sabellianism as I shall understand it meets all these conditions and does not require any *ad hoc* philosophical commitments.<sup>5</sup>

### The Distinctness of Persons

Martinich’s proof does not tell against Sabellianism since his reconstruction ignores a crucial feature of at least one version of Sabellianism, viz. that God plays Father and Son roles at different times.

Suppose God is Father from  $t_0$  to  $t_1$ , Son from  $t_1$  to  $t_2$  and subsequently Holy Spirit. The whole divine history is divided into segments which represent its Father, Son and Holy Spirit stages. “F,” “s” and “h” name these stages; “g” names the temporally extended whole which includes them as its parts. According to the time-line below, g has temporal parts f, s, and h where f = the temporal part of g from  $t_0$  to  $t_1$ , s = the temporal part of g from  $t_1$  to  $t_2$  and h = the temporal part of g from  $t_2$  on.. F, s and h do not have any temporal parts in common but g has temporal parts in common with each of them.



According to the Sabellian, Father and Son are roles that g plays at different times. *Prima facie* this seems to provide an easy solution to the Trinity puzzle. “Father,” “Son” and “Holy Spirit” refer to f, s and h respectively. At any time, t, before  $t_1$ , f is God; at any time, t’, between  $t_1$  and  $t_2$ , s is God so the Father is God and the Son is God. There is however no time at which f = s, since f, s and h, though proper parts of g, are distinct, thus we can say, timelessly, the Father is not the Son. Condition (i) is, therefore met and the conclusion of Sabellius’ argument is false. However on this account so is the first premise since on this account there are (at least) three individuals, namely f, s, and h, who are God.

If however we assume that God is temporal and plays different hypostatic roles at different times, so that the histories of the Persons of the Trinity are temporal parts of God’s history, we do not need this premise to secure monotheism. All we need to capture the spirit of monotheism is the doctrine that *at any time* there is exactly one God. From this it does not follow that the Father is the Son.

Consider a more pedestrian case. At any time, there is just one President of the United States. At one time, Bush was President; at another time Clinton was. There is however no time at which Bush = Clinton. The following inference does not go through:

1.  $(t)(\exists x)[\Phi x \text{ at } t \ \& \ (y)(\Phi y \text{ at } t \supset y = x)]$
2.  $(\exists t)\Phi\alpha \text{ at } t$
3.  $(\exists t')\Phi\alpha \text{ at } t'$
4.  $\alpha = \beta$

1 says that if there is any time an individual that  $\Phi$ s then at that time there is no other individual that does at that time. It leaves open the possibility that different individuals  $\Phi$  at

different times and hence does not entail 4. At any time there is exactly one President. So it is for God.

Nevertheless, even though Martinich's rendition of Sabellius' Argument fails, there is a crucial disanalogy between the political case cited and the theological case, viz. there is no person who is President during both the Bush and Clinton administrations.

Suppose we relativize the monotheism requirement to times:

M:  $(t)(\exists x)[Gx \text{ at } t \cdot (y)(Gy \text{ at } t \supset y = x)]$

M says that at every time there is exactly one individual that is God, but, by itself, M does not help: while it rules out a pantheon of gods it does not rule out a succession of gods. Moreover, the suggestion that f, s and h are God successively appears unsatisfactory because it is hard to see how any of them could have the properties requisite for full or maximal divinity.

Suppose we assume that f, s, and h is each God. Since none of them is everlasting, none of them, it would seem, could be omnipotent. The Father presumably has no control over events that occur after he ceases to exist: the best he can do is convey his plans, somehow, to the Son and Holy Spirit and hope that they will cooperate. The Son and Holy Spirit similarly cannot influence events prior to their inceptions. Instead of one God, it seems, we have at best a succession of three limited gods.

Suppose on the other hand that we assume g, who is everlasting, is God. If this is so then neither f, s nor h can be God since, given M, at any time, there is just one God. Consider how things stand at some time, t, earlier than t<sub>1</sub>. At t, g, and g alone, is God. f therefore is not God at t. By the same reasoning, neither s nor h can, at any time, be God. So it seems we either have a succession of gods but no God or one God but no Trinity.

Trinitarian monotheists wish to say not only that the Persons of the Trinity are each individually God but that the Trinity of Persons is God. Understanding the Persons as God at successive times and relativizing the monotheistic requirement to times may cut down on the number of extraneous Gods but it seems that at any time we are left with two divine beings: g and either f, s or h, depending on the time in question.

Intuitively, it should not matter that g co-exists with f, s and h because f, s and h are *parts* of g--not competing gods. However M seems to require that g is God but neither f, s and h are or vice versa. The problem is to reformulate the monotheism requirement in such a way that it rules out competing gods but does not rule out the coexistence of individuals that are parts of one God.

### **Maintaining Monotheism in the Teeth of Mereology**

The problem with M is that the quantifier ranges unrestrictedly over individuals.

Anything you please is an individual in the broadest sense. My cat is an individual, but so is my cat minus his tail, my cat's tail, and the sum of all cats in the neighborhood together with the front right tire on my car. If you believe in temporal parts there are even more individuals, including my cat from 2:00 to 2:45 on February 20, 2000 and the individual which is the sum of my car now and my cat last Christmas.

No spatial part of a cat is a cat--though some, for example, my cat minus his tail, would be cats if they were detached. Typically, spatial parts of Fs are not themselves Fs. There are

however exceptions: things of some kinds, are self-similar. Parts of a fractal, for example, are fractals.

When it comes to temporal parts of what we should ordinarily regard as three-dimensional objects, “things” in the narrow sense as distinct from processes/events, our intuitions go awry because we do not ordinarily think of such things as having temporal parts at all. Nevertheless, if we can talk about their temporal parts it seems that each temporal part of an F of such a kind is itself an F. I own a car and not merely part of a car even though I bought it used: intuitively, each temporal slice of my car is itself a car.<sup>6</sup>

If however every temporal part of an F is an F then there are too many Fs since at any time that an F is present there will be indefinitely many overlapping Fs present at the same time. On this account, my cat’s history includes a multitude of overlapping individuals each of which is a cat: his current stage and indefinitely many aggregates of cat-stages which include it. Similarly, if God has temporal parts and, quite apart from any special Trinitarian concerns, there will be too many Gods. At any time, t, during the initial stage of g’s history among the individuals who are God there will be g’s stage at t, f, g, the sum of f and s, the gappy individual that is the sum of f and h, the individual that consists of f together with a 10-year segment of s’s history, and all other parts of g that include g’s stage at t.

One plausible way to avoid over-population is to stipulate that when we count Fs at a given time we count by what David Lewis calls “tensed identity.” Tensed identity is not identity but rather the relation that obtains between individuals at a time, t, when they share a stage at t. Individuals that share stages at a time count as one. This eliminates extraneous cats as well as extraneous gods and suggests a plausible way of formulating the monotheism requirement: the individuals which M concerns are to be stages or temporal slices. Replacing Martinich’s 1 with M thus understood does not together with his premises 2 and 3 entail 4. Condition (ii) is met and monotheism is saved.

### **The Persons of the Trinity are God**

It remains to be seen whether on this account the Persons individually are divine or sufficiently divine to qualify as God. Prima facie, it seems not since none individually is everlasting. This by itself seems to undermine divinity claims, moreover in the case of Father and Son, on this scenario, each during his time can look forward to his final extinction. Moreover temporal finitude seems to undermine both omnipotence and omniscience since it would seem that if a being is temporally finite, regardless of his knowledge of events at any given time or ability to bring them about, there will be times when events occur that he does not know about and which he cannot effect.

Some of these difficulties are not peculiar to Sabellianism but arise for any account according to which God is temporal and everlasting rather than eternal. My purpose is not to defend the coherence of an account according to which God is temporal so, if it turns out that an objection is not directed at Sabellianism as such but at any account according to which God is everlasting rather than eternal, it drops out. Other difficulties arise from a failure to take seriously that Father, Son and Holy Spirit, on the proposed account, are not merely a succession of distinct individuals but temporal parts of an individual which itself counts as God and these need to be addressed.

First, if *f*, *s*, and *h* are temporal parts of *g*, which is God, we need not worry that the Father and Son must each look forward to his own annihilation nor that any Person of the Trinity should regret that there are periods of history on which he has missed out. Quite apart from any special theological concerns there are persuasive arguments that purport to show that identity is not “what matters” for survival. Puzzle cases of personal identity involving fission and fusion such as Parfit considers suggest that, intuitively, there are some circumstances in which we should count an individual as surviving as two or more distinct persons. If a person can survive as two or more distinct persons then survival cannot require identity since one individual cannot be identical with two distinct individuals.

The kinds of puzzle cases Parfit, Perry, Lewis and others have discussed do not occur and are not likely to occur even given substantial advances in medical technology. There are no actual cases, or even remotely possible cases, in which two distinct persons are psychologically continuous with (what appears to be) a single individual, exhibit his character traits, carry out his pre-fission plans and have putative memories of having lived his life. Consequently, the significance of puzzle cases in the literature on personal identity has been questioned.

If however God exists and consists of a Trinity of Persons as described we have an actual puzzle case that exhibits all the features that Parfit produces to pump the intuition that survival does not require identity. Since *f*, *s* and *h*, like *g*, are omnibenevolent they will have the same goals and objectives: even if *f* himself is not around at *t'* he can count on *s* to carry out his plans because he knows that *s* wants just what he wants. Since *f*, *s* and *h* are, presumably, omniscient they know all about one another's psychological states and activities. *G* does not get a mind-zap when *s* succeeds *f* or when *h* succeeds *s*: whatever *g* knows about earlier stages of his career at any time, *t*, the Person he is at *t*, knows. At *t'*, *g* knows everything that was going on at *t* so at *t'* *s* knows everything that was going on at *t*.

If psychological continuity to this extent is sufficient for survival then the worry that the Father and Son must anticipate their ultimate extinction is ill founded: Father and Son will anticipate *surviving as* different Persons. If identity is not required for survival then even though none of the Persons individually is everlasting each has “what matters” about everlastingness.

However, even if the Persons are not temporally finite in an objectionable sense it remains to be seen whether they can be understood as omniscient or omnipotent even if *g* is. Since neither *f*, *s* nor *h* is strictly identical with *g* there is no guarantee that whatever is true of *g* will be true of any of them individually.

Nevertheless, since *f*, *s* and *h* are temporal parts of *g*, they will have some of the properties *g* has. To see which ones these are, let us distinguish between what Perry calls basic and non-basic properties.<sup>7</sup> An individual's basic properties are those which it has at a time wholly in virtue of events that occur at that time; its non-basic properties are those it has at a time wholly or partly in virtue of events that occur at other times. Right now, for example, I have the basic property of being in my office and the non-basic property of being about to be home. At any time, *t*, that an individual has a basic property, *P*, its stage-at-*t* has *P*. My current person-stage has the property of being in my office; it does not however have the non-basic property of being about to be at my house since it will not be around that long.

If this is correct then any Person of the Trinity that exists at a time *t* will have just those basic properties *g* has at *t*. Suppose that at *t*, God spoke to Moses from the burning bush. Since that is presumably a basic property of *g* at *t*, it follows that *f* has that property, that is, that the

Father spoke to Moses from the burning bush. At  $t'$   $g$  has the non-basic property of having spoken to Moses from the burning bush.  $S$  does not however have that property since he was not around at  $t$  to do the talking so it is not the case that the Son spoke to Moses from the burning bush.

The distinction between basic and non-basic properties is problematic but crucial because without it we should have to say that all properties  $g$  has at a time,  $t$ , are properties the Person who exists at that time has. This would undermine the distinctness of Persons. At  $t$ ,  $g$  has the property of being about to be the Son. If  $f$  has *all* the properties that  $g$  has at  $t$  it follows that the Father has the property of being about to be the Son. This is not the obviously objectionable claim that the Father *is* the Son but it is still a result that we would like to avoid. If possible, we would like to say that while God is first Father, then becomes Son and finally Holy Spirit without being committed to holding that the Father becomes the Son and the Son subsequently becomes the Holy Spirit.

Moreover, on this account it would seem that both omniscience and omnipotence turn out to be non-basic properties. To be omniscient at  $t$ , an individual has to know how things are at every time. Knowing that  $P$  requires that  $P$  be true. Suppose that, at  $t$ ,  $g$  believes that John the Baptist will be beheaded at  $t'$ .  $G$ 's belief counts as knowledge only if John the Baptist *is* beheaded at  $t'$  therefore  $g$ 's knowing at  $t$  that John the Baptist will be beheaded is a non-basic basic property. An individual is omnipotent at  $t$  only if he knows everything, including propositions whose truth-makers occur at times other than  $t$ : being omniscient is, therefore, non-basic.

Nevertheless, while an individual's having a non-basic property,  $P$ , at a time,  $t$ , does not entail that its temporal part at  $t$  has  $P$  it does not entail that its temporal part at  $t$  does *not* have  $P$  and, arguably, that if  $g$  is omniscient then so are  $f$ ,  $s$  and  $h$ . On any reasonably non-restrictive account of knowledge even we, finite and epistemically limited beings, can know about affairs before we were born and after we die. I know that World War II occurred. I think I also know that 100 years from now, presumably after I am dead, the Grand Canyon will still exist. In general,  $x$ 's knowing that  $P$  at  $t$  does not require that  $x$  be around when  $P$ 's truth-making conditions obtain--only that everything requisite for  $x$ 's believing that  $P$  obtain at  $t$  and that  $P$  is true.

Since  $g$  is omniscient, at  $t$ ,  $g$  knows that John the Baptist will be beheaded at  $t'$ . In addition to  $g$ 's basic psychological properties at  $t$ , all that is required for him to count as knowing that John the Baptist will be beheaded is the fact that John the Baptist is beheaded. Though  $g$  will be around when it happens he does not have to be for his state at  $t$  to count as knowledge.  $F$  shares all  $g$ 's basic properties at  $t$  including those in virtue of which  $g$  believes that John the Baptist will be beheaded. The only further requirement for his psychological state at  $t$  to count as knowledge is for John the Baptist actually to get beheaded-- $f$  does not have to be around when it happens. John the Baptist does get beheaded so  $f$  knows that he will be. The same will go for anything  $g$  knows at any time and for each of the Persons. If God is omniscient then so is each of the Persons.

Omnipotence poses additional difficulties. To be omnipotent is to be able to do any action. Presumably,  $x$  is omnipotent at  $t$  only if he can do any action including actions at times other than  $t$ . Nevertheless, while an individual can know about events that occur at times (and places) when he is not around, to do an action it would seem that an individual has to be where,

and when, the action is. At  $t$ ,  $g$  can do actions at  $t'$  because he will be there at  $t'$  to do them.  $F$  however will not be there so he will not be able to do those actions. So, it would seem, since in general none of the Persons is around at all times, none of them individually is able to do everything which is to say none of them individually is omnipotent.

The problem of omnipotence is not however a difficulty peculiar to Sabellianism: it is a difficulty for any account according to which God is everlasting rather than eternal. Suppose that God is temporal and it makes sense to talk about his states and capacities at different times. Then there is a question of whether at a given time,  $t$ , *God* can bring about events at other times. Bringing about future events seems relatively unproblematic. Even finite beings can set the machinery in motion to bring about future events, even events that occur when they are not around. Notoriously, I can kill someone by putting a slow-acting poison in his drink. We assume however that omnipotence requires that the ability to bring about events more directly, simply by fiat and without any intervening causal mechanism.

It is not clear that, at  $t$ , God can *directly* bring about an event,  $e$ , at a time,  $t'$ , other than  $t$ . What is true of God at  $t$ , is that he is such at  $t'$  that he was or will be able to bring about  $e$ . This is to say that there is an individual,  $x$ , who, at  $t'$ , can directly bring about  $e$  and  $\text{God} = x$ . It is not to say that there is any being, God included, who, *at  $t$* , can directly bring about  $e$  at  $t'$ . If  $x$ 's being omnipotent requires that at every time,  $t$ ,  $x$  be able to bring about events at any time,  $t'$ , directly then regardless of any special wrinkles Trinitarian concerns introduce, a temporal God cannot count as omnipotent. Arguably setting such high standards for omnipotence rules out  $g$ , who is everlasting but temporal, as well as  $f$ ,  $s$ , and  $h$ .

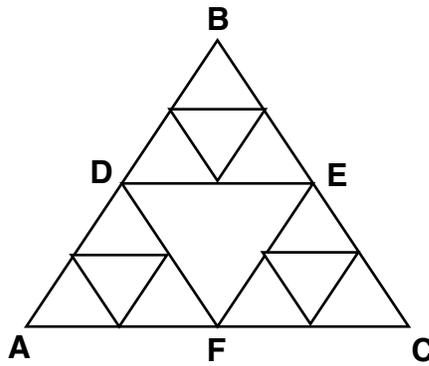
If however  $x$ 's being able at every time,  $t$ , to bring about events *at  $t$*  directly suffices for omnipotence then  $g$  is omnipotent, and so are  $f$ ,  $s$  and  $h$ . At any time,  $t$ , whatever event at  $t$   $g$  can bring about, the Person who exists at  $t$  can bring about since the property of being able to bring about a *current* event is basic and, at any time,  $t$ ,  $f$ ,  $s$ , and  $h$  have all basic properties that  $g$  has at  $t$ . If this is good enough for omnipotence, then the Persons are omnipotent. If it is not, then neither is God the Trinity. The Persons, therefore, are as omnipotent or impotent as  $g$  is.

If  $g$  is God, there is no compelling reason to think that the Persons are not. Condition (iii) is satisfied.

### **The Trinity of Persons is God**

The last concern is as to whether, given that each of the Persons is God, the Trinity of Persons, that is  $g$ , can count as God. *Prima facie*, it seems not since  $g$  is an aggregate, albeit a temporal aggregate, of individuals that are God. Typically, aggregates of  $F$ s are not themselves  $F$ s. A collection of cats is not itself a cat. Perhaps more to the point, even though corporations can be legally endowed with some of the rights and obligations of persons and mobs may exhibit something like "group mind," an aggregate of persons is not is a person.

There is however no reason to think that in general, no aggregate of  $F$ s can be an  $F$ . It just happens that most sortal predicates are anti-cumulative and anti-dissective: typically, no aggregate of  $F$ s is an  $F$  and no proper parts of an  $F$  are  $F$ s. The sum of cats in my neighborhood is not a cat, and neither is any part of my cat, including those parts that *would* be cats if they were detached from other cat parts. Aggregates of cats and undetached cat parts may be feline, but they are not cats. There are however predicates that are not anti-cumulative or anti-dissective. Fractals, for example, include parts that are fractals. Consider the Sierpinski Triangle:



ABC is a triangle but so are ADF, DBE, FEC and so on. The latter are not just triangular in the way that attached cat parts are feline: they are triangles. Therefore, it is not the case that all sortal predicates are anti-cumulative and anti-dissective and there is no obvious reason why the fact that f, s and h are each God should preclude g's being God.

Moreover, f, s and h are temporal parts of g. When it comes to temporal parts, our pre-theoretical intuitions may fail us but, as suggested earlier, there is some reason to think that ordinary sortals are neither temporally anti-cumulative nor temporally anti-dissective. My car right now is a car and not merely part of a car. My car tomorrow is a car and so is my car during the year 2000.

If this is so then the problem is not to allow for g's being God in light of the claim that its temporal parts, f, s and h are God. Rather the question is how we can avoid the conclusion that, in addition to g itself, *each of g's* temporal parts, including momentary time-slices, the sum of f and s, the sum of s and h, proper parts of f, s and h, and gappy, gerrymandered sums of g's parts is God. Nevertheless, even if we do arrive at this conclusion it does not follow that each of these parts is a Trinitarian Person which is all that we require. Given the revised Monotheism Requirement the multitude of overlapping individuals that count as God poses no problem: at any given time, we count Gods by occurrent stages. And there is no reason why some individuals that figure in g's history should not count as Persons while others do not.

So Condition (iv) is met. Holding that each of the Persons of the Trinity is God does not preclude holding that the Trinity of Persons is not merely divine, in being an aggregate of Gods, but is God in the very same sense that each of the Persons is God.

### **Theology: Intratrinitarian Relations**

If all this is correct then Sabellianism as I have understood it provides a minimally decent doctrine of the Trinity. While monotheistic, it does not confound the persons: in particular, it does not entail that the Father is the Son. And it does not shortchange either the Persons individually or the Trinity since it allows us to say that each Person of the Trinity and the Trinity of Persons is God.

Even so, some will object that (i) – (iv) are not adequate for theological purposes since they fail to capture what Christians have wanted to say about relations amongst the Persons of the Trinity. In Scripture, Jesus is represented as praying to his Father. The current account would seem to preclude such interaction. Moreover, in subsequent theological developments the Persons of the Trinity individually were held to exist from the beginning and bear relations to one another: in particular, it was held that the Son is begotten of his Father before all worlds

while the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father (and, on some accounts, the Son). Accommodating such intratrinitarian relations poses difficulties for an account according to which the Persons are successive, non-overlapping temporal parts of one God.

These concerns however pose similar difficulties for orthodox versions of what Brian Leftow has called “Latin Trinitarianism,” the project of explaining the doctrine of the Trinity that begins from the oneness of God and tries to explain how one God can be three divine Persons.<sup>8</sup> Notoriously, while Social Trinitarianism, which assumes the distinctness of Persons and attempts to explain how they can count as one God, is in danger of slipping into Tri-Theism or, historically, Arianism, the heterodox limit of Latin Trinitarianism is Sabellianism.

Leftow argues that the Latin Trinitarian can maintain orthodoxy by avoiding anthropomorphic assumptions about the temporal ordering of God’s inner life:

[O]ne should approach the Trinity by asking in what ways God's life is free from ordinary temporal relations. A temporalist can just say: the events of God's life are not so strange as to be wholly atemporal. They have at least some typically temporal properties. But they are free enough from ordinary temporal ordering that we can say that God lives His life in three streams "at once," and index Trinitarian truths to appropriate sets of events.<sup>9</sup>

The idea of an omniscient being living his life in three temporal streams of consciousness is strange, even if it is not so strange as the notion of a wholly atemporal consciousness. Leftow’s purpose however is not to avoid strangeness or to achieve theological minimalism but maintain orthodoxy. The purpose of the current discussion, by contrast, is not to maintain orthodoxy but to ascertain how far one can go in articulating a doctrine of the Trinity that satisfies conditions (i) to (iv) and, insofar as possible, accounts for relations between the Persons, without strangeness. For this purpose, one should approach doctrine of the Trinity by asking how an account of the Trinity can be developed without the assumption that God’s life is free from ordinary temporal relations.

The Sabellian account suggested here is intended to minimize strangeness or, at least specifically Trinitarian strangeness that goes beyond the strangeness of theism as such. On this account, God, like humans, lives his life in one stream and, like humans, has temporal parts. Even if the doctrine that humans and other material things have temporal parts is strange, the suggestion that God has temporal parts is no stranger. Moreover, together with a plausible account about how talk about the Trinity developed, this account can explain both what Jesus was doing when he prayed and taught about God, whom he called “Father,” and why the Church came to hold that the Father was, in some sense, the Source of the Son and Holy Spirit.

From a timeless perspective, God is a Trinity of Persons. This was true before anyone knew it or distinguished the Persons of the Trinity as such. Arguably, when Jesus prayed to God, calling him “Father,” like his contemporaries, he intended to address g. He did not intend to address a specific Person of the Trinity, but the Being who he and his contemporaries alike knew as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, whom the Church later recognized to be a Trinity of Persons.

There is little evidence in Scripture that Jesus ever intended to provide theological instruction about the doctrine of the Trinity or that he called the God to whom he prayed “Father” in order to mark a distinction between the First and Second Persons. Rather his intention seems to have been to make the statement that God, the God of the Hebrew tradition,

had qualities analogous to those of a human parent. Subsequently, however, as Trinitarian theology developed Christians came to refer to the First Person of the Trinity as “Father.”

As a consequence of this history, I suggest that “Father” is ambiguous. In some contexts it refers to f, the First Person of the Trinity; in others it refers to g, the Trinity of Persons which theists who are not Christians know simply as God, and that that ambiguity led Christians to affirm both that the Father was a Person of the Trinity and the Source of the Son and Holy Spirit.

This account provides a more plausible explanation of what Jesus took himself to be doing than the suggestion that in calling God “Father” he intended to refer to the First Person of the Trinity.<sup>10</sup> It also makes better intuitive sense of the Trinitarian processions than orthodox doctrine, which regards them as relations amongst the Persons. If we want to understand these relations to be causal then we shall have to introduce a notion of timeless, metaphysically necessary causation, which is *sui generis* and, at best, obscure. In addition, the suggestion that the Father is, in some sense the First among Equals and the Source of the Son and Holy Spirit is puzzling. Each of the Persons is omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent—it is hard to see how any one of the persons could do better than that.<sup>11</sup>

On the account proposed here, none of the Persons of the Trinity is a cause of any of the others and neither f, nor either of any of the other Persons of the Trinity, is both equal to the others yet prior to the others. Rather one name, “Father,” may be used to refer not only to one of the Persons of the Trinity but to the Trinity *in toto*, which can be understood as the Source of the Persons to the extent that it is the Being of which they are modes or, on the current account, temporal parts. On this account, Christians may affirm the following:

- (1) The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are, in every respect, equally God.
- (2) The Son is begotten of the Father.
- (3) The Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father.

In (1), “Father” refers to the First Person of the Trinity. In (2) and (3) “Father” refers the God the Trinity which is, on Sabellian accounts, either the Being of which Son and Holy Spirit are modes or, on the current proposal, the whole of which Son and Holy Spirit are temporal parts.

Christians may object that this account fails to capture what is meant by doctrines concerning the generation of the Son and Holy Spirit but, arguably, orthodox accounts have not been particularly illuminating in giving an account of what is meant.<sup>12</sup> On orthodox accounts, the generation of the Son and Holy Spirit by the Father within the life of the Trinity are *sui generis* and mysterious. On heterodox Sabellian accounts the relation between God, the Trinity, and the Persons of the Trinity is neither *sui generis* nor any more mysterious than similar relations which hold on mundane objects: it is the relation between an object and its modes or the relation between a thing and its temporal parts.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, if we avoid using the name “Father” to refer both to the Trinity and to the First Person of the Trinity within the same context we can block objectionable inferences. Whether we understand both occurrences of “Father” in (4) to refer to the Trinity or to the First Person of the Trinity it turns out to be false since neither is either a mode or a proper temporal part of itself:

- (4) The Father is begotten by or proceeds from the Father.

Similarly, so long as we are consistent in how we understand “Father” in a given context we will not, as early critics of Sabellianism suggested, be forced to conclude that the Son is his own Father since (5) is also false<sup>14</sup>:

(5) The Son begets the Son.

“Son” refers unambiguously to the Second Person of the Trinity, which is not identical either with the First Person or with the Trinity *in toto*. We shall also however have to reject (6) since on the current account no Person of the Trinity generates any other Person, either alone or with the cooperation of the First Person:

(6) The Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and Son.

Many orthodox Christians however regard the Filioque Clause as, at best, expendable.

### **Reconsidering Sabellianism**

Arguably, in addition to its theological merits, the Neo-Sabellian account proposed here is philosophically preferable to accounts suggested by Geach, Martinich and Van Inwagen since it does not commit us to relative identity or require any *ad hoc* philosophical commitments.

Sabellianism is heretical. However making the cut between Christian doctrine and its philosophical packaging has always been problematic: since the second century, formulations of Christian dogma have been cast in Platonic, Neoplatonic and, later, Aristotelian terms and accounts of Christian teaching have been declared heretical because they were inconsistent with preferred philosophical doctrines. So Hippolytus in his “Refutation of All Heresies,” claims that Sabellianism embodies the philosophically untenable doctrines of “Heraclitus the Obscure” and objects to understanding God as temporal on the grounds that it reduces divine reality to the inferior status of mere material things, which undergo change.

Arguably, Christianity should not commit one to any large-scale metaphysical system or to any philosophical doctrines. If it turns out that the objections to Sabellianism assume commitment to Platonic doctrines, we should reconsider the decision to reject Sabellianism as heretical. And if, as I have argued, it gets the religious results Christians want at a lower philosophical cost than competing orthodox views, it should be preferred.

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful for comments by participants at the Society of Christian Philosophers 2000 meeting and University of San Diego Philosophy colloquium at which earlier versions of this paper were read, and by anonymous referees for this journal.

<sup>2</sup> On the neo-Sabellian account I shall consider, Father, Son and Holy Spirit are successive temporal parts of God. Some suggest that four-dimensionalism, the doctrine that continuants, things in the narrow sense as distinct from events or processes, have temporal parts is reversionary or even unintelligible. Nevertheless, though contentious, four-dimensionalism is not theologically motivated and the purpose of this discussion however is not to make the case for four-dimensionalism but to rather to canvass the prospects for a theologically minimalist doctrine of the Trinity which does not appeal to theologically motivated metaphysical doctrines. The value of theological minimalism has been questioned.

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Many Christian philosophers would hold that theological concerns illuminate philosophical understanding and would emphatically reject the view that secular philosophical concerns should set the agenda for the discussion of theological issues. It is controversial, in particular, whether it is either desirable or possible to produce an account of the doctrine of the Trinity that avoids introducing philosophical doctrines that are motivated solely or primarily for the purpose of circumventing the logical puzzles it poses. vide Alvin Plantinga. "Advice to Christian Philosophers." *Faith and Philosophy*: vol. 1 (1984) Many philosophers writing on the doctrine of the Trinity would question or reject theological minimalism as a goal. So, for example, in his discussion of the doctrine (*The Christian God*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994) Richard Swinburne suggests that while the Father causes the Son to exist this is not Arianism because it is metaphysically necessary that this causation occur. This notion of metaphysically necessary causation is theologically motivated and incompatible with some accounts of causation to which a philosopher might be committed for non-theological reasons. Similarly, in support of the claim that the Persons of the Trinity are not three Gods but one God, Peter Van Inwagen who elsewhere, in *Material Beings* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990) firmly maintains his commitment to the absolute or classical view of the identity relation, develops a system of Relative-Identity logic to facilitate his theological project. Whether this represents a change of heart about identity or the suggestion that relative identity goes for God but not for anything else, theological concerns are driving his metaphysics. My interest in this essay, by contrast, is to see how far we can get with a minimalist account of the Trinity that, in effect, leaves everything else as it was.

<sup>3</sup> Martinich, A. P., "Identity and Trinity"; *Journal of Religion*, 1978, p. 172

<sup>4</sup> Less costly and more intricate versions of relative identity have more recently become available--see, e.g. Deutsch, H. (1998). *Identity and General Similarity. Philosophical Perspectives: Language, Mind and Ontology*. J. E. Tomberlin. Boston, MA, Blackwell Publishers, Inc. **12**: 177-199.

<sup>5</sup> Strict orthodoxy, I understand, imposes further requirements on a doctrine of God which the current account fails, in particular eternity rather than mere everlastingness and simplicity since it assumes that God is everlasting rather than eternal or atemporal, and has temporal parts.

<sup>6</sup> Disagreement between three-dimensionalists and four-dimensionalists, who hold that continuants as well as processes/events have temporal as well as spatial parts, is frequently thought to turn on the question of whether such things are "wholly present" at every time during their histories. However, arguably, a four-dimensionalist may consistently hold that proper temporal parts of objects of some kinds, K, are themselves Ks. See, e.g. Sider, T. (1997). "Four-Dimensionalism." *Philosophical Review* **106**: 197-231.

<sup>7</sup> Perry, John, "Can The Self Divide"; *Journal of Philosophy*: 1972, 463-488, Vol. 69, No. 16

<sup>8</sup> Brian Leftow, "Anti-Social Trinitarianism"; Stephen Davis, Daniel Kendall and Gerald O'Collins, eds. *The Trinity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, 203-249.

<sup>9</sup> Brian Leftow. "Events and Trinity" (unpublished)

<sup>10</sup> Christians like myself who believe that Christ was the Second Person of the Trinity, true man and true God, are not thereby committed to the view that in his humanity Jesus knew that God was a Trinity of Persons or that he knew himself to be a Person of the Trinity. The doctrine of the Trinity was largely in flux for almost three centuries after Jesus' death until the Council of Nicea. In Scripture, binitarian formulae as well as Trinitarian formulae figure significantly.

Moreover, in religious discourse, there is plenty of slippage between references to God the Trinity and God the Father beginning with St. Paul who, in a favorite Trinitarian passage, appears to refer to God the Father as "God" simpliciter: "The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all evermore. (2 Corinthians 13:14 as cited in *The Book of Common Prayer*.) Nobody worries that Paul is, in effect, invoking the Trinity twice over in this passage—it is understood that when used without further qualification "God" can refer to God the Father, though not to Christ or to the Holy Spirit. I do not think it is ad hoc to suggest that a similar "Father" displays similar ambiguity.

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<sup>11</sup> Swinburne, for example, in *The Christian God*, suggests that some persons of the Trinity are more equal than others in order to address the puzzle of conflicting omnipotent volitions. “There could not be two divine individuals unless there was some mechanism to prevent interference... only if one lays down what the rules are, and his decision is accepted because he has the authority to lay down the rules, will the collision necessarily be avoided. But a difference in authority would have to arise from some other difference of status.” (pp. 172-3)

<sup>12</sup> vide, e.g. Swinburne, pp. 183-184 for a discussion of traditional accounts of the processions within the Trinity.

<sup>13</sup> Speculatively, what appears to motivate doctrine concerning Trinitarian processions is the religious intuition that there is *more to God* than God incarnate as Christ and the Holy Spirit operative within the Church, that there is a transcendent source of God’s manifestations, and moreover that manifest distinctions amongst the Persons of the Trinity as regards their worldly activities must reflect some intrinsic distinctions in the inner life of God. So, for example, C. Fitzsimmons Allison in *The Cruelty of Heresy* (New York: Moorehouse Publishing, 1993) argues that Sabellian or Modalist accounts make out God as a deceiver. He suggests that without an immanent Trinity, independent of the created world, backing the economic Trinity the manifest personae of God would be deceptive masks and the apparent distinction between Persons would be an illusion. The current account captures the idea that there is more to God than his worldly manifestations.

Furthermore there is no reason to assume, as Allison apparently does, that extrinsic properties are illusory or inherently deceptive. According to orthodox Christian doctrine, God would have been a Trinity of Persons even if he had not created the world hence, presumably, that the properties in virtue of which God is Trinitarian are intrinsic. We should however ask what, if anything, would be lost from the religious point of view by jettisoning this doctrine. Even if the properties in virtue of which God is Trinitarian are extrinsic it does not follow that God’s Trinitarian character is either deceptive or illusory.

In a different vein Swinburne worries that rejecting the doctrine that God is necessarily Trinitarian would undermine claims about the equality of the Persons: “[S]ince the Father had no option but to cause the Son, and Father and Son had no option but to cause the Spirit, and all exist eternally, the dependence of Son on Father, and of Spirit on Father and Son, does not diminish greatness... A king who at some stage in his reign voluntarily shares his kingdom with another may well be thought to be greater than the other. But a king who for all his reign has to share his kingdom with another may reasonably be considered no greater than the other.” (Swinburne, *The Christian God*, p. 185). Even if this argument were persuasive it would not have purchase on the proposed account according to which it is God who is, as a matter of fact, Trinitarian, rather than the First Person, that is the Source of the Son and Holy Spirit. On this account the God who would have existed had he not caused the Son and Holy Spirit would not have been the First Person of the Trinity but the God who in choosing to be Trinitarian is the Source or ground of all the Persons.

<sup>14</sup> see, e.g. Hippolytus “Refutation of All Heresies” *Library of Christian Classics, Early Christian Fathers*, vol. V at <http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/>