Swinburne's A Priori Argument for Social Trinitarianism

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ABSTRACT: In this paper, I critically assess Richard Swinburne's argument for the conceptual necessity of the claim that if there is one divine person, then there are exactly three divine persons. I argue that his argument fails.

For those of us who are philosophically minded Trinitarian Christians, it would be nice if there were an argument in favour of God being triune that did not depend on taking either Scripture or church authority as revealing this fact to us. It is not that, as Christians, we can be against the Scriptures or church authority *per se*, but rather that there can be reasonable disagreement (even amongst Christians) on both (a) the correct interpretation of the Scriptures on this matter, and (b) the identity of the true church, the genuinely authoritative councils, and so on. That being so, arguments from Scripture or the authority of the church et al. are not going to be ones all reasonable persons or even all reasonable theists or self-identifying Christians will accept. And yet the prospects for an argument not drawing on premises provided by such contested authorities look bleak. The fact that God is triune does not—at least *prima facie*—look as if it is a conceptual necessity. It looks—at least *prima facie*—as if the mono-personal theism of Jews, Unitarian Christians, and Muslims is as coherent as (if not, one might fear, more coherent than) the tripersonal theism of Trinitarian Christians. And *if* it is *not* a conceptual necessity that if there is a God, then He is triune, then it looks as if no philosophical argument for it will be based on premises acceptable to all rational people, or even to all rational theists or Christians. So, for philosophically minded Trinitarian Christians, this is all—potentially, at least—less than ideal.

But *prima facie* is not *ultima facie*—there was an antecedent that was passed over quickly and perhaps should have been lingered on. "*If* it is *not* a conceptual necessity that if there is a God, then He is triune, then . . ." If it *is* a conceptual necessity, then things are very different.

In several locations,[1] Richard Swinburne has argued that there is a knowably sound a priori argument for the truth of the claim that if there's a God, then He is tripersonal proceeding via conceptual analysis alone. According to Swinburne, the doctrine of the Trinity *is* a conceptual necessity after all. If Swinburne's argument works, then the mono-personal theism of Jews, Unitarian Christians, and Muslims is *not* as coherent as the tripersonal theism of Trinitarian Christians; indeed, it's not coherent at all; Trinitarianism is the only *ultima facie* coherent version of theism. Swinburne's argument is therefore bound to be deeply attractive for those of us who are philosophically minded Trinitarian Christians.

[1] Most recently, he has argued for it in Swinburne (2018). There were previous and slightly different versions of his argument for this view; this latest articulation is, he has said in personal conversation and correspondence, the most definitive statement of his developed view and of the argument for it which he now wishes to endorse. Earlier versions may be found in Swinburne (1988; 1994; 2008; 2014). In Swinburne (2014), he reviews a book by William Hasker (Hasker 2013), in which, in chapter 18, Hasker gives an overall sympathetic critique of Swinburne's view as it had then stood.

Journal of Analytic Theology, Vol. 13, Fall 2025
10.12978/jat.2025-13.19-51-51120013

In this paper, I shall briefly lay out Swinburne's Social Trinitarianism and discuss why he believes it is not, as it is often accused of being, a tritheistic account. Whilst giving a sympathetic rendering of Swinburne's views on this matter, my purpose in doing this is not to defend him against the charge of tritheism, but simply to get his views on the Trinity clearly stated as a prelude to discussing his argument in favour of their conceptual necessity given that there is a God at all. I shall then go on to assess this argument for the conceptual necessity of the claim that if there is a God, then He is as this view (tritheistic or not) characterises Him.

1. Swinburne's Social Trinitarianism

We suppose for a starting point that there is a personal being who is divine as theism describes the essence of divinity—He is an omnipotent, omniscient, eternal, and perfectly good personal being. We call this personal being 'the Father.' The doctrine of the Trinity states that as well as the Father, there are exactly two other divine persons—we may call them 'the Son' and 'the Spirit'—who are brought forth (begotten and spirated) by either the Father alone or, in the case of the Spirit, perhaps by the Father and the Son (or through the Son). Being divine, the Son and the Spirit both share in the essence of divinity; they too are both omnipotent, omniscient, and so on. Collectively, these three divine persons—Father, Son, and Spirit—are God.

Swinburne has two main things to say in response to the worry that this account of the Trinity is tritheistic.

Firstly, these three personal beings are necessarily unified in what they will; there is not even a *conceptual possibility* of divergence of will between them. This follows from their all being omnipotent, omniscient, and thus perfectly good. (Perfect goodness follows from omnipotence when it's seen against a background of a certain type of value objectivism.) According to Swinburne, they will each thus will the best action (whenever there is a unique best) or one of the joint best actions (where two or more are equally good and none better), and their wills will thus always coincide with one another in such cases. Furthermore, they will necessarily be in agreement with one another about who has authority over any choice between options when there are an infinite array of options each one of which is better than the previous, or two or more each of which is as good as the other(s) and any one of which they might thus have chosen. They will of their essence be in agreement with one another about such matters, for such an agreement would be best and indeed is necessary to sustain their omnipotence. This necessary unity of will being as it is, though we can quite properly in ordinary language attribute specific external divine actions to specific members of the Trinity (e.g., "I was inspired by the Holy Spirit yesterday"), it would in a philosophical context perhaps be less misleading to talk of the external divine actions as coming from the Father, Son, and Spirit jointly.[2]

For my part, I find a good analogy here provided by imagining a committee that is such that, whilst each individual member of the committee might have specific areas of responsibility and action-points arising, the decisions of the committee on what to do and who should do it are always unanimous. With that sort of tight connection between the wills of committee members, whilst there may well be a sense in which committee member Mr.

[2] This is not so for what we may call the 'internal' or 'characteristic' actions of the individual members (e.g., it is the Father, not the Son, the Spirit, or the collective, who begets).

Smith performs one discrete action and committee member Ms. Jones another discrete action, that they each do what they do is their actioning the committee's unitary will, either that they do precisely what they do or that they do that which they choose to do in the domains in which the committee wills that they have authority to exercise individual choice. There are not three Gods then, any more than there are three committees.[3] According to Swinburne, for there to be (*per impossibile*) three Gods, there'd have to be three persons having the divine essence and yet with some possibility of independent will and thus action, between whom some disunity of will and conflict in action was at least possible; and that is not the case. There is not even the possibility of such disharmony between the divine persons; and thus, they should be counted as one God.

Secondly, Swinburne argues that the three persons are dependent on each other not simply for their wills (and consequent actions) being as they are, but for their very existence. Given that the Father begets the Son and (either alone or with or through the Son) spirates the Spirit, it will be obvious without argument that the Son and the Spirit depend on the Father. What may not be so obvious, at least initially, is that the Father depends on the Son and indeed on the Spirit. After all, it is precisely the Son who is begotten by the Father and the Spirit who proceeds from the Father (the Father alone or the Father with/through the Son) and being begotten by or proceeding from are asymmetric relations. However, Swinburne argues that none of the three persons of the Trinity has thisness; and so, he says, they are the persons they are solely *due* to their relational properties—the Father then wouldn't *be* the Father if He did not beget the Son etc.[4] (An object has thisness if its identity is not solely a matter of the properties it has.) Swinburne is clear that God—the Trinity—is not to be counted as a fourth person and again, for me, the committee analogy works well: Three people constitute the committee; the committee is not itself a fourth person.[5]

These two points (necessary unity of will and necessary mutual dependence), Swinburne thinks, are sufficient for rebutting the charge of tritheism.[6] Suspending judgement on whether Swinburne is right about that, I note that even if he is wrong on this front, his account is not thereby rendered incoherent. The argument of Swinburne's on which it is my purpose to focus is to the effect that not only is his account coherent, but that it is the *only* coherent account of divinity. If this argument of his works, then he could respond to such critics by claiming that, tritheistic or not, if there is a God, He *has* to be conceded to be as Swinburne has characterised Him on pain of incoherence.[7]

2. Swinburne's A Priori Argument for His Social Trinitarianism

[3] The divine persons are properly called 'parts' of the Trinity "in the sense that they constitute the Trinity, and—although they would be unwilling to express the point in this way—I suggest that most of the Fathers and mediaevals would have accepted that" (Swinburne 2018, 425).

[4] So, "each [of the divine persons] is not such that there could have been instead of him a different divine person with all the same intrinsic properties and all the same relations to other beings as the actual Father, Son, or Spirit. . . . [W]hat makes an individual divine person that individual person is his kind nature—that is, his divine nature, and his relation to other divine persons" (Swinburne 2018, 424).

[5] The most recent expression of that line of Swinburne's thinking is in Swinburne (2022). Of course, that God is not a personal being makes it a bit hard to think that worship may properly be directed to Him (or indeed even that personal pronouns are appropriate), points pressed by Leftow (1999).

[6] However, see again Leftow (1999).

[7] It should be noted that the majority of philosophers and theologians assessing his account have not believed it successfully avoids the charge of tritheism. (See, e.g., Rea (2006).) Even Hasker, whose treatment of Swinburne's view is one of the most sympathetic in the literature, concludes that it in the end fails on this front.

The claim that is under scrutiny in this paper then is the claim that it's conceptually necessary that given that there's one divine person, there have to be exactly three divine persons. We can thus think of the issue that faces Swinburne as how we get from there being the Father to there being the Father, the Son, and the Spirit by conceptual necessity, and how, having got there, we can then stop, again by conceptual necessity.[8]

Let's start then with the Father considering—everlastingly or timelessly—what beings He might bring forth.[9] Our first question might be, "Why is it a conceptual impossibility that He might bring nothing forth at all—stay a solitary divine person and be content with that?"

According to Swinburne, the Father cannot rest content with that due to the truth of what he calls the Dionysian principle—that good is diffusive of itself. If you're good (and have the relevant power and knowledge), you will inevitably produce more good, either by improving already existing things (making what's not so good better) or by bringing forth new good things.[10] As the Father alone could not improve Himself, so He'd inevitably bring forth a new good being. Or rather, He would bring forth at least one instance of a new good being if there were a uniquely best kind of being to bring forth; and there *is* such a uniquely best kind of being, the divine kind of being. So the Father must bring forth at least one divine being other than Himself. Also, maybe (epistemically) He'd need to bring forth more than one, since if there were a uniquely best number of this best kind of being for Him to bring forth, He'd of necessity need to bring forth that number and perhaps that number is greater than one. We'll come back to this in a moment. For now, let's call this 'new' divine being 'the Son' and the bringing forth in His case 'begetting.' Thus, on Swinburne's account, the Father necessarily begets the Son.

Swinburne also gets to this necessity through an analysis of love. The best form of love, Swinburne tells us, is reciprocated love between two or more equals, and so the Father—to be perfectly loving—needs another divine person (or persons) to love and to be loved by.[11]

We've got then, in Swinburne's latest version of his argument, two parallel lines of thinking directing us to the same conclusion (the necessity of the begetting of the Son by the Father), one based on an analysis of goodness and one based on an analysis of love. But both of these lines of argument seem dubious, as both of these analyses seem dubious. The Dionysian Principle and the claim that the best form of love is reciprocated love between two or more equals need to be conceptually necessary truths for them to do the work

[8] As will become clear at the end of my paper, I actually think that setting up the challenge as "getting to three and then stopping" is potentially misleading, but nevertheless it is, I think, a useful way of introducing the issue.

[9] I use the construction 'bring forth' rather than 'create' as traditionally (e.g., in credal formulations) we talk of the Son and the Spirit as 'uncreated,' and instead 'begotten' or 'proceeding from'; as I use it, 'bring forth' is meant to be a more general term that would include any begetting or spirating (resulting in something being begotten or proceeding from), but also include any creating of a universe or some such. This terminological nicety aside though, to be clear, Swinburne's view is that the Son and Holy Spirit are created (by the Father), the Father alone being uncreated, which—per se—some are going to find objectionable.

[10] "Important to mediaeval thought was the Dionysian principle, that goodness by its very nature is diffusive of itself: it seeks to produce more good things" (Swinburne 2018, 429).

[11] "I would say that perfect love must be fully mutual love, reciprocated in kind and quantity, involving total sharing, the kind of love involved in a perfect marriage; and only a being who could share with him the rule of the universe could fully reciprocate the love of another such. While of course the love of a parent for a child is of immense value, it is not the love of equals; and one thing which makes it as valuable as it is, is that the parent is seeking to make the child (as she grows up) into an equal. To put the point in the terminology I used earlier, it would be a unique best action for the Father to cause the existence of the Son, and so inevitably he would do so" (Swinburne 2018, 429–30).

Swinburne puts them to in his argument; and, I suggest, they are not that. Indeed, I suggest, they are plausibly not even truths.

For us, existing as we do in a less-than-ideal created order in which our actions affect others who already exist, then—assuredly—being good sometimes requires of us that we bring forth new good things or improve things that already exist and could be improved. But, 'prior' to any bringing forth, in a world where there are no other beings who can be affected for good or ill by anything a divine person does (and where there won't be any, unless that divine person does bring them forth), all of those requiring reasons for action fall away. There may yet be justifying reasons for bringing forth. And I think in fact that it is a failure to distinguish them from requiring ones that is at the root of the confusion here.

If one thinks that even if there is a uniquely best action, one for which there are more reasons than there are for any other action, then as long as the reasons in virtue of which it is the uniquely best are only justifying reasons, perfect goodness does not require one to perform said action, and the argument falls apart. I do so think, and so I judge things as I do.[12] In terms of Swinburne's account, then, this disagreement of mine with him fundamentally arises earlier in his argument and concerns his analysis of what perfect goodness requires, which I gave without criticism earlier. Swinburne says, "Recognizing an action as good entails having some motivation to do it, and recognizing an action as better than another entails having greater motivation to do it" (2018, 427). Not necessarily, I say. Parsing what makes an action best in such a way that an action for which one has more reasons than any other may be correctly called 'best,' I would say that, *pace* Swinburne, perfect goodness does not always require of one that one does the best action; when it's best solely because there is a justifying reason for doing it that there is not for doing whatever action is thereby pushed into second-best, one is not less than perfectly good simply in virtue of one's failing to do the best action.

In any case, a solitary divine being choosing to remain solitary would not thereby harm anyone; there'd be nobody that His decision to remain alone would adversely affect and thus there'd be no necessary imperfection implied by His choosing to remain alone. And things are similar with love.

In the created order as it is, with us humans having the natures that we do, reciprocated love between two or more equals is a great form of love, though I am not myself convinced that it is a conceptual necessity or even a truth that it is the greatest form of love even for humans—isn't the greatest form of love our love of God, who is not our equal? But in any case, in a world 'prior' to any bringing forth, a solitary divine being loving solely Himself would not of conceptual necessity be as such deficient in terms of love. He'd love Himself, and He would of course be equal to Himself. But anyway, He'd have no need from unrequited love to bring into existence another. There's something unappealing about an individual human person being fully self-satisfied, but not about an individual divine person being so. Or so I suggest.

This all being so, I judge that the Dionysian principle is not applicable to God; nor is the analysis of love given right. In this context, it is important to note that I do not need to be correct in judging Swinburne's argument to rely on false premises at this stage, since even if I'm wrong and they are true premises, that is not enough for his argument; his argument needs them to be true *of conceptual necessity*. That being so, even if I am wrong in denying the truth of these premises, as long as what I have said in denying them has been coherent, that is in itself reason to think that these premises Swinburne relies on are not true of conceptual

[12] See Mawson (2022).

necessity and hence that his argument fails. Of course, it is *also* true that, given that he has two parallel arguments for the same point at this stage in his argument, if only one of my lines of objection to these two premises is misguided, Swinburne's argument could still get him through this territory, relying then on the other premise. It's also the case that if you think one or other of these premises, even if not true of conceptual necessity, is nevertheless true, you'll probably think of it/them as true of metaphysical necessity—they look like the sorts of things that would have that modality to them; and, if so, you'll be interested in a version of 'Swinburne's' argument rendered as one proceeding via metaphysical, rather than conceptual, reasoning. But such a Swinburne-inspired argument would not be Swinburne's own argument, and it is his argument that is the focus of this paper.[13] Swinburne himself cannot take this route as he does not believe in metaphysical necessity, though his view here is complicated by his insistence that he believes in it in any sense that makes sense; but the senses that he insists make sense reduce to conceptual necessity. We'll return to considering the prospects for an argument for the Trinity from metaphysical (rather than alleged conceptual) truths at the end of this paper.

For the moment, let's suppose that at least one of these two objections of mine is misguided, and Swinburne's argument can get him to the conclusion that of conceptual necessity the Father wouldn't be good and/or He wouldn't be loving unless He brought forth another divine person. That gets us to two divine persons. How to get to three? (And then, how to stop?)

At this point in his argument, Swinburne relies on the claim that "A twosome can be selfish" and cites an example of a married couple who are focused solely on their own love for each other without concern for the wider world. The full passage from Swinburne reads as follows:

> A twosome can be selfish. A marriage in which husband and wife are interested only in each other and do not seek to spread the love they have for each other, is a deficient marriage. (And of course the obvious way, but not the only way, in which they can spread their love is by having children). Perfect love for a beloved, Richard (*ibid.* 3.11) argues, must involve the wish that the beloved should be loved by someone else also. Hence it will be a unique best action for the Father to cause the existence of a third divine being whom Father and Son could love and by whom each could be loved. Hence the Holy Spirit. And I suggest that it would be best if the Father included the Son as co-cause (as he is of all other actions of the Father) in causing the Spirit. (2018, 430)

But Swinburne needs a stronger claim than the (true) claim that a couple *can be* selfish; he needs the claim that *they cannot but be* selfish, of conceptual necessity. And yet a marriage in which husband and wife are interested only in each other—due to the fact that there is nobody else whom they could possibly affect (unless they bring someone into existence), for good or ill (say because they are stranded forever on a desert island)—is not, it seems to me, deficient as a marriage. Perfect love for the beloved, *pace* Richard of St. Victor and Richard of Oriel, whilst it may need to involve the wish that the beloved should be loved by anyone else who is actual, does not need to involve the wish that there be anyone additional to oneself

[13] For one recent example of such a Swinburne-inspired argument, see Sijuwade (2024).

who would love the beloved (and be loved by them) and thus compel an action to bring into existence such a new person in order to be an additional lover (and loved one) of the beloved should no suitable person be already around. (I do not think my wife would take it as a sign of lack of selfishness and lack of deficiency in our marriage were I to suggest that we bring into our bed some other woman to whom I had taken a fancy and who seemed very open-minded to the idea of taking a fancy to the both of us.) Hence it will *not, pace* Swinburne, be a unique best action for the Father to cause the existence of a third divine being whom the Father and Son could then love and by whom each of them could be loved. (In passing, I suggest that whatever plausibility there was in the claim that a twosome is of conceptual necessity selfish (remember nobody need deny that couples can be contingently so) would transfer over to the claim that a throuple is of conceptual necessity selfish, which transference would of course be fatal to a later stage of Swinburne's argument.[14])

Selfishness seems to me best defined as pursuing one's own self-interest at the known expense of another. A solitary divine person who remained solitary could not therefore be selfish; nor could a divine couple, simply by virtue of remaining a couple; there would be nobody other than themselves, and thus there'd be nobody other than themselves at whose expense they were acting. Nor is it the case that each member of such a couple would of conceptual necessity be selfish in their love of the other—again, at whose expense could they be acting? No one's.[15]

So, I think this stage of Swinburne's argument is in trouble too; I don't think we can get from two to three (even if we could get from one to two, about which I've also expressed my doubts).[16]

Nevertheless, let's suppose that I'm wrong to object to this stage too; we *can* get from two to three, as Swinburne argues. The challenge now is to stop.

Here Swinburne argues as follows. As there would be no need for a fourth divine person, so any fourth 'divine' person would not be necessary, but, given that it's of the essence of divinity to be necessary, the fourth so-called 'divine' person wouldn't really be divine; thus, a fourth divine person is in fact an impossibility. Thus, for all kinds of being, three is the minimum for perfection (given his previous arguments); for divine beings, three is also the maximum (given this argument).

However, I think this argument derails in the following way.

[14] Though incidental to the main line of argument here and Swinburne doesn't rely on it for anything else, I note that Swinburne's suggestion that it would be "best" if the Father included the Son as co-cause here is one for which he offers no support, and it does not seem intuitively obvious or even right to me. I can't see why it would be best for Him to do things one way rather the other. In an earlier version of his view, Swinburne talked about the good of cooperation as what was behind the move from two to three; and it may be an echo of his sympathy for the good of cooperation that we are hearing here. Leftow (1999) critiques the possibility of cooperation being able to fill the role Swinburne's argument needs it to fill.

[15] In addition, even if having the character trait of perfect lovingness is best understood in a Swinburnean way, it is not clear that it is a conceptual necessity that one needs to be manifesting that character trait in order to have it; indeed, one might think it's pretty clear one does not. See Lebens and Tuggy (2019). Swinburne tellingly sometimes speaks of the processions as giving God the possibility to manifest love, not instantiate it. (E.g., Swinburne (2018, 430).)

[16] In conversation, Swinburne has suggested a third way of justifying the move from two to three, which I discuss briefly: According to him, it is a necessary truth that if one person, *X*, loves another, *Y*, then *X* must will that there be yet another person, *Z*, who also loves *Y* and is loved by *Y*. But when pressed, he justifies this with the thought that it would be selfish of *X* not so to will a third person.

If Swinburne is right that couples *per se* must of conceptual necessity be selfish (or, anyway, in some way deficient), then that entails that there must be at least one more divine[17] person than two; it does not entail that there must be precisely one more than two. The selfishness (or other form of deficiency) would be made up for by one *or more* other divine persons; it'd be necessary that there be at least one more divine person, but there'd be no particular positive number of other divine persons that it'd be necessary that there be; more than one is not needed, but nor is it needed that there be fewer than two, three, four, and so on. But this threatens a contradiction in Swinburne's system: For however many 'divine' persons beyond the Son were brought forth, even if just one more, it'd be true that the fact that there be that number was not a necessary fact. Each beyond the first two could say, "At least one of us had to be here, but of none of us is it true that we had to be here." It is true that if there is in fact only one further (beyond the two), then that one further can say, "One of us had to be here; and, as I'm the only one, I had to be here," only if what individuates this final divine person as the one that He is are solely His relational properties to the one (or the two) from which He proceeds and there are no other *possible* manners (other than begetting or spirating) by which one divine person can bring forth another. And remember that for Swinburne's argument, it needs to be that there are no other *conceptually* possible manners of bringing forth.[18] But it just is conceptually possible that there are other ways divine persons can bring forth additional divine persons (other ways than begetting and spirating, that is). Plausibly it's conceptually possible that there's an infinite number of such ways; and it would follow from this that there could be yet more divine persons than any given number of divine persons. But then we get to the contradiction (if we suppose it a conceptual truth that all divine persons need to be necessary), for the fact that *that particular* third 'divine' person exists, rather than one brought forth by some other process (other than begetting or spirating), would be a contingency. There could have been another 'divine' person, other than the one that actually exists, one who would, in virtue of being brought forth in a different manner from the manner in which the actual was brought forth, have been a different divine person. And that's not possible (assuming all divine persons must be necessary); thus we have the contradiction.

So, it seems to me that if (as I have given reason to doubt) the Father and the Son would be selfish (or in some other way deficient) were one or both not to bring forth at least one other, then there is no "uniquely best" solution to the problem they face and, that being so, they could *not* bring forth another or several others without that other or several others being in fact contingent (on their picking one or more of several possible ways of bringing forth one or more additional divine persons), and thus any additional 'divine' beings would not be divine at all presuming divinity is incompatible with contingency. At this stage, to shore up his argument, Swinburne needs an additional premise, something like, "It's best to get by with smaller numbers of beings than greater, presuming one can get by with smaller."[19] I

[17] I take it that it is plausible that the person or persons uniquely best qualified to meet the alleged challenge will be divine, so the divinity of the necessary additional person or persons is not something that needs separate argumentation.

[18] If we were to admit that there are other conceptually possible alternatives, but deny that any of them are metaphysically possible, then we could advance a Swinburne-inspired argument in the reasonable hope it could proceed at this point.

[19] Another move would be to assert that there is some uniquely best sort of bringing forth 'at this stage,' namely spirating, and no more that are uniquely best 'after' a spiration. But that some manner of bringing forth is better than all others at this stage (in getting from two to three), but at none after this stage, seems to me even less likely to be a conceptual necessity than the additional premise I suggest in the main text, so I leave this possible way forward out of view in the main text. ('Stage' and 'after' talk is perhaps misleading here; nothing

don't see the rational motivation that could be given for such an additional premise and again I would note that it would need to be a premise that is a conceptual necessity for the argument to work.

Here is what Swinburne says in full:

> So why only three divine persons? Do not these arguments suggest that there should be more than three divine persons. Richard of St. Victor's answer (ibid. 5.15) is that there would be no need for a fourth since three divine persons would satisfy the demands of love fully. I argued earlier that when there is a unique best action a divine person must do it. It was a unique best action for the Father to bring about another divine person- for perfect love requires another with whom to share; and it was a unique best action for Father and Son to bring about a third divine person, for the love of Father for Son and Son for Father required that they should cause there to be some divine person other than themselves for the other to love and be loved by. Three persons is the necessary minimum for unselfish love between persons of some kind. Every member of the Trinity could show unselfish love without there being a fourth divine person. However Richard did not consider an objection that even so, surely the more divine persons the better, and so surely good divine persons would produce lots more divine persons; and hence he has not proved that God must be triune. His argument needs a crucial step which I now add to it, as follows: if the objection were correct, then however many divine persons the Father (in conjunction with others) brought about, it would be still better if he brought about more. But, as I argued earlier, when there is an infinite series of incompatible possible good actions, each better than the previous one, available to some agent, it is not logically possible that he do the best one—because there is no best action. An agent is perfectly good in that situation if he does any one of those good actions. So since to bring about only three divine persons would be incompatible with an alternative action of bringing about only four divine persons, and so generally, the perfect goodness of the Father would be satisfied by his bringing about only two further divine persons. He does not have to bring about a fourth divine person in order to fulfil his divine nature. To create a fourth divine person would therefore be an act of will, not an act of nature. But then any fourth divine person would not exist necessarily in the sense in which the second and third divine persons exist necessarily—his existence would not be a necessary consequence of the existence of a necessary being; and hence he would not be divine. So there cannot be a fourth divine person. There must be and can only be three divine persons.[20]

about temporal precedence should be read into it.) Swinburne could reinsert his value judgement about the good of cooperation to shore up the argument here; 'after' one bringing forth (a begetting), there's a second uniquely best manner of bringing forth (a spirating) involving cooperation between the first two members of the Trinity; but after that has been done, there's no 'third' uniquely best manner of bringing forth (cooperating between three, for example, isn't better than cooperating between two; or perhaps it is, but then there's no limit to how many people could cooperate, so the members picking any one way would be contingent and thus the further 'divine' beings generated not really divine). I think there's more prospect of getting this to come out right for those who believe in metaphysical necessities, for this seems implausible as a conceptual necessity.

[20] Swinburne (2018, 430–31).

Pace Swinburne's own analysis, I then am saying that the threat to Swinburne's position at this stage is not the objection he says Richard of St. Victor did not consider; and that, by concentrating on the objection that he does, Swinburne misleads us into a way of thinking whereby we consider the Father and Son to "already have" the third divine person and so, with that one already "in the bag," any fourth, fifth, and so on would not be needed (and thus not necessary, and thus not divine). And this way of thinking is encouraged by my own ways of presenting the issues at various stages in my main text, natural though they are in setting up the issues (e.g., "getting to" a second divine person and then "stopping" when one's gotten to a third). To say that no fourth would be needed is a misleading way of putting things. As I have indicated, no particular additional number in the range one-infinity is needed, so—if the argument has in fact gotten us this far—just some additional number of divine persons in that range is needed. Thus, *pace* Swinburne, there is no "unique best action" that the Father and Son can perform in order to get over the difficulty Swinburne says they potentially face—selfishness. Or at least, there is no best action unless some other tie-breaker for being best is introduced, say the principle that it's always best to get by with a smaller number of beings than a larger number, as I discuss it. That could do it, as I concede. But it is not a conceptual necessity. (See also my earlier note for the possible move of introducing cooperation as a good-making feature of a bringing forth.) If it is not a conceptual necessity, then Swinburne's argument has failed.

Conclusion

In conclusion, then, suspending judgement on whether Swinburne's Social Trinitarianism avoids the challenge of tritheism, I have argued that we cannot maintain in the manner of Swinburne that it is a conceptual truth that if there is one divine person, then there are exactly three divine persons as he describes them. Singletons are not of conceptual necessity inferior to couples; and couples are not of conceptual necessity inferior to throuples.

One might ask then if those of us who are Trinitarian Christians find ourselves in the end back at the "less than ideal" point I sketched in the opening paragraph. I close by hazarding the thought that there may be a knowably sound argument that admits that the necessities it relies on are metaphysical (not conceptual). One such argument could be what we have called a "Swinburne-inspired" one, conceding in a way that he does not that crucial premises of Swinburne's original argument are not conceptually necessary but only metaphysically so. But I wish to close by considering an argument that proceeds from the possibility of the Economic Trinity to arrive at the actuality of the Immanent Trinity in the following manner. Naturally, I can provide only a sketch.

There are metaphysical necessities due to the nature of significant freedom; moral goodness; God's moral standing; and the requirements and good-making features of forgiveness such that, if God is to be free over His choice whether to create a world with significantly free creatures (such as ourselves) in it, then He must have within Himself the resources to handle the possibility of these creatures sinning and consequently needing salvation, which resources will require exactly three divine persons for the mechanics of atonement, as it would be required (or at least best). Then, given that to be omnipotent God must be able to create a universe with creatures such as ourselves in it, so He must have this

necessary-should-a-created-order-fall Trinitarian structure 'prior' to His choice over whether or not to create. Such an argument could look like this:

1) If there is a God, then He is omnipotent and perfectly good.
2) For God to be omnipotent, it must be possible for Him to create a universe such as ours, with significantly free creatures, such as ourselves, in it.
3) A universe in which there are significantly free creatures such as ourselves is one in which a fall is possible.
4) If there is a God, a fall must be possible (from 1, 2 and 3).
5) For God to be perfectly good, then, if a fall is possible, it must be possible for Him to redeem fallen creatures, in whichever way it would be best for Him to redeem them.
6) If there is a God, it must be possible for Him to redeem fallen creatures in whichever way it would be best for Him to redeem them (from 1, 4, and 5).
7) The best way for God to redeem fallen creatures necessitates the activity of three distinct divine persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (the Trinity).
8) If there is a God, an Economic Trinity must be possible (from 6 and 7).
9) For an Economic Trinity to be possible, an Immanent Trinity must be actual.
10) If there is a God, then He must be a Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (from 8 and 9).

Premise 1 is a definitional claim, acceptable to all theists *qua* theists; 2 doesn't rely on any analysis of omnipotence that is going to be rejectable by any theist (given that they believe that God has in fact created a universe such as ours); and, similarly, 3 is not rejectable by any theist, as theists are committed to thinking that a fall has in fact occurred. Premise 4 follows from 1, 2, and 3. Premise 5 relies on an analysis of what is required for perfect goodness, but again not one that is going to be rejectable by any theist; and 6 then follows from what has come before. Premise 7 is therefore what is going to be doing the heavy lifting in this argument. I have suggested that if it is true, it is plausibly true of metaphysical but of not conceptual necessity; and thus, it may be rejected by Jews, Unitarian Christians, and Muslims, without their being incoherent in doing so. Nevertheless, I am in this concluding thought expressing the hope that a posteriori reasons can be given for granting it. If 7 is granted, then 8 follows from what has gone before; and 9 merely adds in the thought that God must be in His nature such as to be able to do that which 8 has told us it must be possible for Him to do. Premise 10 then follows. But whatever one makes of this argument, it is not Swinburne's. Swinburne's argument for the a priori derivability of the Trinity from the claim that God exists is one that I hope to have shown fails.[21]

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[21] I am grateful to Richard Swinburne and the participants at the symposium in honour of his 90th birthday held in Oriel College in December 2024 for their comments on a version of this paper delivered there. I am also grateful for the comments and attention of the anonymous referees for this journal.

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