

William Hasker

Metaphysics and the Tri-Personal God.

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William Hasker's *Metaphysics and the Tri-Personal God* is the first book-length treatment of the doctrine of the Trinity from a contemporary analytic perspective. But it is as theologically sensitive as it is philosophically acute, and so represents an exemplary contribution to the literature marching under the banner of analytic theology. The book is evenly divided into three parts, each with ten small chapters. The first explicates and defends theological desiderata foundational to the doctrine, the second surveys and critiques contemporary theological and philosophical work intended to build on those foundations, and the third consists of Hasker's own constructive proposal.

Hasker argues that the foundations of an acceptable doctrine of the Trinity were laid by the 'pro-Nicenes,' Augustine and the Cappadocian Fathers—the principle defenders of classic Trinitarian thought as expressed in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan tradition. So-called 'pro-Nicene Trinitarianism' (PNT) holds the most promise for being 'in fact a substantially correct reading of what has come to us as divine revelation' (15). The core of PNT can be uncovered by discerning what the pro-Nicenes meant in affirming that God is three '*hypostases*' or '*personae*' on the one hand, and one '*ousia*' or '*essentia*' on the other. A careful analysis, despite what others have claimed, reveals that the pro-Nicenes affirmed, albeit proleptically, the central tenant of Social Trinitarianism: that the three *hypostases* are 'distinct centers of knowledge, love, will, and action' (22). Further, they thought God's oneness consisted of more than just the Persons sharing an abstract divine nature or essence; they also thought of the divine nature as a single concrete trope of divinity common to the Persons. Before going any further Hasker makes a bush-clearing effort to 'excise' a strong doctrine of divine simplicity—one that sticks a '=' between everything divine—from Trinitarian theorizing. Such a doctrine not only 'threatens to become a cognitive black hole that swallows up everything positive we might want to say about God' (61) but also flagrantly contradicts the Trinitarian non-negotiable 'Father ≠ Son ≠ Spirit'.

Part II surveys a handful of contemporary authors whose work on the Trinity is ostensibly faithful to PNT yet goes beyond the *flatus vocis* of creeds. Hasker looks at four theologians (Barth, Rahner, Moltmann, and Zizioulas) and six philosophers (Leftow, van Inwagen, Brower and Rea, Craig, Swinburne, Yandell). Because similar surveys are on offer elsewhere (e.g., McCall and Rea (eds.), *Philosophical and Theological Essays on the Trinity* (Oxford, 2009); McCall, *Which Trinity Whose Monotheism?* (Eerdmans, 2010)), I will not rehearse the details here. I will say that the chapters on the theologians are too thin to add much to Hasker's project—not that that's Hasker's fault; if anything, it reinforces the impression that, in general, contemporary theology is not the place to look for perspicuous treatments of the doctrine of the Trinity. The chapters on the philosophers, by contrast, are clear and judicious. Hasker's eagerness to find common ground is admirable. The space devoted to the theologians would have been better spent elucidating suppressed details there, or on part III.

The overall metaphysical account of the Trinity that Hasker defends in Part III has four primary elements. First, the divine Persons are 'distinct centers of knowledge, love, will, and action'. Second, the Son and Spirit eternally and essentially derive their existence from the Father,

who is underived. These immanent processions explain *why* God is a Trinity of persons *à la* attempts to justify the doctrine *rationibus necessariis*. Third, the Persons enjoy perichoretic union, or perfect harmony of knowledge, love, and will. This harmony, perfect though it is, does not entail there is but a ‘single act of willing’ or ‘one set of mental states’ among them (204–205). The Persons have distinct mental and volitional faculties whose content is transparent to and in agreement with the others’. Finally, there is one ‘underlying’ or ‘supporting’ concrete divine nature, a single trope of divinity that *constitutes* the Persons *qua* Trinitarian Persons. Here Hasker relies on Lynn Baker’s account of constitution. Central to the account is the notion of a *primary kind*, which answers the question ‘What most fundamentally is *x*?’ and *circumstances*, which answers ‘In virtue of what is *y* the kind of thing that it is?’ A piece of fabric has the primary kind *cloth*, say, but constitutes something with the primary kind *flag* in the right circumstances. The application to the Trinity is for the most part straightforward: the one substance, which has the constituting kind *divine soul* or *concrete divine nature*, constitutes the Persons as *divine Trinitarian persons* when it simultaneously sustains three sets of faculties sufficient for (divine) personhood. Hasker discusses split-brain and multiple-personality phenomena as indirect empirical support for thinking something like this aspect of the model ‘not merely does not contradict known truths but is consonant with relevant things that we know’ (227).

By way of evaluation, a few potentially weak points of Hasker’s overall account seem worth registering. First, Hasker’s appeal to split-brain and multiple-personality phenomena as evidence for the possibility of his model seems strained because in neither phenomenon, Hasker thinks, are there really multiple *persons* supported by an underlying substance. But from all that has been said about what persons are—i.e., ‘distinct centers of knowledge, love, will, and action’—I am left wondering why this isn’t the case. Second, note that on Baker’s account of constitution it is metaphysically possible that the *constituting* kind (e.g., cloth) exist without the *constituted* kind (e.g., flag). To avoid the awkward claim that it is possible for the divine soul to exist without the divine Persons, Hasker interprets ‘possible’ as conceptual rather than metaphysical possibility, which seems unmotivated. Third, I would have liked to see more discussion of how the traditional divine attributes should be understood in light of an explicitly Social Trinitarian conception of God. For example, that each Person is omniscient and omnibenevolent doesn’t seem sufficient for ruling out the possibility of a clash of wills between them, *contra* Hasker (208).

The feature of immanent processions, however, raises more serious concerns. Hasker argues via a dilemma that positing processions is the best way to stave off the threat of tritheism. He writes: ‘it would seem to be essential either that two of the persons derive their existence from that of the third ..., or that all three depend for their existence on some fourth reality, presumably the divine nature or essence’ (215). Hasker objects to the latter option because it entails that ‘the ultimate source of reality, of deity, is not the persons as such but rather the non-personal divine nature which supports and enables their existence’ (215). The point here seems to be that the ultimate source of reality is best seen as personal, as persons have wills, and wills are sources. Hasker therefore identifies the Father as the ultimate source and so affirms the first option; i.e., processions. But this seems incompatible with the divinity of the other Persons. Not being asymmetrically dependent for one’s existence on another certainly seems like a divine perfection (i.e., aseity). But, plausibly, *p* is a divine perfection iff *p* is in the divine essence, and whatever is predicated of the divine essence should be predicated equally of the Persons. But that property by its very nature cannot be communicated by the Father to the other Persons. Further, it turns out that by Hasker’s own lights not even the Father can have this property, for on his model *all three* Persons depend for their existence on the underlying substance that constitutes them. It is *it*, not the Father that is the ultimate source of all reality. Thus,

Hasker runs into a dilemma of his own: either the ultimate source is the Father or it is the underlying divine substance. If the former, the other divine Persons aren't perfect because they asymmetrically depend for their existence on the Father. If the latter, the ultimate source isn't a person *and* no Person is divine, since all three asymmetrically depend for their existence on the underlying substance.

The most plausible way out, I think, is to advance a model of the following sort. Have it that the divine Persons *symmetrically* depend for their existence on each other and see them *together as a group* as the personal source of all non-divine reality. Here I recommend Social Trinitarians take seriously recent work on group agency realism, according to which appropriately structured groups can qualify not just as agents distinct from their members, but as persons. (See, for example, Philip Pettit and Christian List, *Group Agency: The Possibility, Design, and Status of Corporate Agents* (Oxford, 2011) and recent work by K. M. Hess). Such a model allows us to ascribe aseity to each of the divine Persons (assuming what aseity eschews is *asymmetric* ontological dependence), and has the additional virtue of answering the 'God is not a person' objection so beloved by critics of Social Trinitarianism, the force of which Hasker doesn't seem to fully appreciate.

To conclude, I should say that, overall, this is an excellent book. It would serve nicely as an introduction to recent literature on the topic. The main philosophical strides forward are made in chapters 25-28. The text and prose are pristine; I had no difficulty discerning Hasker's meaning and I found only one typo (231). Kudos to Hasker and OUP for producing a remarkably lucid book.

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