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Junior Research Seminar: Mereology East and West

Critical Review of Jeffrey E. Brower and Michael C. Rea, "Material Constitution and the Trinity"

Thesis

The Doctrine of the Trinity--that there are three distinct persons, each of whom is God, and that there is only one God--is not incoherent, because objects can be numerically the same without being strictly identical, and this is the case with the Trinity.

Thesis Context

The Doctrine of the Trinity affirms three claims: (1) each Person of the Trinity (Father, Son, Holy Spirit) is distinct from the others; (2) each Person of the Trinity is God; (3) there is exactly one God. These claims seem to be jointly inconsistent: if each Person is God (2) and yet distinct from the other two persons (1), it seems to follow that there are three Gods; but this contradicts (3).

An account of why the three claims are *not* jointly inconsistent should satisfy five requirements: (D1) consistency with the individuality of each Person, the divinity of each Person, and the existence of exactly one divine individual; (D2) consistency with a natural reading of the Bible and orthodox creeds; (D3) consistency with God being an individual (rather than a collection of individuals) and each Person not being part of God; (D4) consistency with a classical view of identity [which is absolute rather than relativized to a particular respect, such as identity in respect of personhood]; (D5) free of antirealist metaphysical commitments. Extant accounts fail to satisfy at least one of these requirements.

Central Argument

Definition: An *accidental unity* is a unified object that exists only by virtue of an accidental property being instantiated by a substance.

Example 1: The object 'seated-Socrates' is an accidental unity: the accidental property is 'being seated' and the substance is Socrates.

Example 2: A human being is an accidental unity: the accidental property is 'being human' / 'being organized in a human-like way' and the substance is the human being's matter.

Definition: A thing is numerically the same but not numerically identical just if it is composed of numerically distinct objects that are to be counted as one object.

Claim: An accidental unity and its substance are numerically the same (one in number) but not strictly identical (numerically identical).

Example 1: *seated-Socrates* and *Socrates* are numerically the same but not numerically identical.

Example 2: the human being Plato and Plato's matter are numerically the same but not numerically identical.

Objection 1: Objects are numerically identical just if they are numerically the same, because objects are to be counted as one if and only if they are numerically identical.

Reply: A piano is an accidental unity of 'being piano-like' and the piano's substance. When we sell a piano, we do not charge for the piano (the accidental unity) and its substance (e.g., the wood and ivory): we count them as the same (as numerically the same). But the piano and its wood are not numerically identical: the wood can survive being dismantled but the piano cannot. (This is part of the Problem of Material Constitution.) So common sense tells against the objection.

Objection 2: If numerically the same objects can be numerically distinct, then distinct material objects can be located at the same place at the same time. But material objects cannot be co-located like this.

Reply: The objection depends on a definition of 'material object' that one is not compelling.

Account:

- 1 - The divine essence is like matter/substance, and the properties 'being a Father,' 'being a Son,' 'being a Holy Spirit' are properties that the divine essence can have.
- 2 - Each Person is a unity [but not an *accidental unity*?] of one of the above three properties and the divine essence.
- 3 - Each Person is distinct from the others in virtue of being numerically the same (one in number) as the others but numerically distinct (not strictly identical).
 - Because, although we count the three Persons as One, each has different properties and therefore (via Leibniz's Law?) is not numerically identical to the others.
- 4 - Each Person is God, in virtue of being composed of the divine essence.

Claim: X is a God = X is a unity [but not an *accidental unity*?] of some property that is instantiated in divine essence.

- 5 - There is only one God, because there is only one divine essence.

Claim: This account satisfies the five above-mentioned requirements.

Critique

The plausibility of the distinction between numerical sameness and numerical identity is based upon ordinary cases in which some substance instantiates an *accidental* property (a property it is possible for the object to not have). In the case of the Trinity, Christian orthodoxy holds that God is *essentially* (non-accidentally) Trinitarian in nature because God has the properties he does *of necessity*.

This prompts my question: is it plausible to apply the numerical sameness / numerical identity distinction to unified objects that are not *accidental* unities?

Brower and Rea defend their account from Objection 2 by appealing to common sense. What does common sense say about cases of *non-accidental* unities? (Are there cases other than the Trinity? If so, does common sense judge the unified object and its substance to be the *same* and *identical*?)