In defence of mystery: a reply to Dale Tuggy

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Abstract: **In a recent article, Dale Tuggy argues that the two most favoured approaches to explicating the doctrine of the Trinity, Social Trinitarianism and Latin Trinitarianism, are unsatisfactory on either logical or biblical grounds. Moreover, he contends that appealing to 'mystery' in the face of apparent contradiction is rationally and theologically unacceptable. I raise some critical questions about Tuggy's assessment of the most relevant biblical data, before defending against his objections the rationality of an appeal to mystery in the face of theological paradox.**

Introduction

Dale Tuggy has recently argued with admirable force and clarity that the two most favoured approaches to explicating the doctrine of the Trinity, Social Trinitarianism (ST) and Latin Trinitarianism (LT), are unsatisfactory on either logical or biblical grounds.[1] He further contends that appealing to 'mystery' in the face of apparent contradiction is rationally and theologically unacceptable. Tuggy thus concludes that the project of Trinitarian theorizing is far from complete. In the first part of this paper, I take issue with some of Tuggy's remarks regarding the biblical data relevant to Trinitarian doctrine; in the second part, I outline a model for understanding the apparently inconsistent claims involved in the doctrine of the Trinity according to which it is perfectly rational to believe such claims. Although the model involves an appeal to mystery, in certain well-defined senses, I show that it can avoid the criticisms Tuggy levels at such a move.

Trinitarian claims and the biblical data

Tuggy invites us to consider the following six claims, some subset of which has been taken by most Christians to express in a systematic way the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity:

(1)   God is divine.
(2)   The Father of Jesus Christ is divine.

(3)   The Son, Jesus Christ, is divine.

(4)   The Holy Spirit is divine.

(5)   The Father is not the Son is not the Holy Spirit is not God. That is, these four – Father, Son, Holy Spirit, God – are numerically distinct individuals.

(6)   Whatever is divine is identical to at least one of these: the Father, the Son, or the Holy Spirit.

Moreover, (5) can be divided into two distinct claims:

(5a)   These three are numerically distinct: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

(5b)   God is numerically distinct from any of these: Father, Son, Holy Spirit.

In these statements, the word 'divine' refers to 'the property of being a divinity or being a god, some sort of supernatural being' and the word 'God' functions as a proper name, designating just that individual referred to as 'Yahweh' or 'the LORD' in the Old Testament (166). No doubt there are alternative ways of expressing the claims of orthodoxy Trinitarianism, but Tuggy's formulation is fairly typical and provides a more than adequate basis for the points I wish to make in this first section.

Assessing the scriptural support for the above claims, Tuggy indicates that each of (1)–(4), (5a), and (6) is a biblical datum, with (5b) being the conspicuous exception. He concludes:

> On the face of it, on scriptural grounds a Christian must believe every proposition but (5), which has an extra-scriptural element, (5b). Thus, it seems a Christian ought to deny (5). If (5) is false, then at least two of those four names (God, Father, Son, Holy Spirit) are names of the same individual. Further, if (5a) is implied by the scriptures, then it is (5b) which should be denied. (167)

I suggest that Tuggy's assessment of the biblical support for these six (or seven) claims is questionable. By 'datum', I assume Tuggy means a proposition that is either directly stated in scripture or else *implied* by such statements (as the quote above indicates). In this sense, I wholeheartedly agree that (1)–(4), (5a), and (6) appear to be biblical data. Yet it also seems to me that the following two additional claims have comparable credentials in this regard:

(7)   The Father of Jesus Christ is identical to God.

(8)   The Son, Jesus Christ, is identical to God.

There is no shortage of scriptural support for (7). In the New Testament alone, where the Trinitarian personal distinctions are most evident, one might point to John 6.45, John 8.54 and 1 Corinthians 8.6 as particularly striking statements. Since Tuggy accepts (6) and later remarks that many careful readers 'have noticed that in the New Testament ''God'' and ''the Father'' are almost always

two names for one thing' (169), I will not argue this point further. Clearly, if any one of the three divine persons is a prime candidate for identity with Yahweh, it is the Father.

Although one would not gather it from Tuggy's discussion, however, there is also substantial scriptural support for (8). For example, there are numerous instances of the New Testament writers apparently *identifying* Jesus with Yahweh: Matthew 3.3 and Mark 1.3 (cf. Isaiah 40.3); John 8.58 (cf. Exodus 3.14); John 12.41 (cf. Isaiah 6.1); Luke 2.11 (cf. v. 9); Romans 10.9, 12–13 (cf. Joel 2.32); Ephesians 4.8 (cf. Psalms 68.18); Philippians 2.9–11 (cf. Isaiah 45.22–24); 1 Corinthians 2.16 (cf. Isaiah 40.13); 1 Corinthians 10.4 (cf. Exodus 13.21); Hebrews 1.10–12 (cf. Psalms 102.25–27); 1 Peter 2.8 (cf. Isaiah 8.13–14).[2] This is not identification in a weak sense (e.g. 'Jesus identified himself with sinners by being baptized'), but in a stronger, numerical sense: two proper names (or rigid designators, to use the Kripkean terminology) are treated as co-referential.[3]

It might be countered that such seemingly strong identity claims are susceptible to alternative interpretations; this is no doubt true, but the same goes (in principle) for *all* biblical statements, including those to which Tuggy appeals for support. My point here is merely that (8) appears to be just as worthy of the category 'biblical datum' as (1)–(4), (5a), (6), and (7). One might go further and suggest that there is respectable scriptural support (e.g., Acts 5: 3–4) for the following claim:

> (9)   The Holy Spirit is identical to God.

Yet even without having to rely on (9), each of the three constituent claims of (5b) – God is distinct from the Father; God is distinct from the Son; God is distinct from the Spirit – can be deduced from (5a) and either (7) or (8). Furthermore, a good case can be made that the following is *also* a biblical datum, insofar as it appears to be implied by scriptural statements:

> (10)   There is one divine being.

Thus, the biblical data which Trinitarian theorizers need to accommodate turn out to be rather more extensive (and awkward) than Tuggy's assessment would suggest. His contention that a version of the doctrine which satisfies the triple constraints of consistency, intelligibility, and good fit with the Bible can be achieved by rejecting (5b) – as well as, one assumes, (8)–(10) – is subject to considerable doubt. Yet the logical problem that motivates Tuggy's proposal is not yet resolved, for, even leaving aside (5b), a seeming contradiction arises simply from adding (8) to the mix. Tuggy's arguments against ST and LT are persuasive; I concur with his conclusion that they fail to deliver in their promises. So what is a rational, biblical Trinitarian to do?

Apparent contradiction

The set of claims (1)–(6) strikes us as obviously inconsistent, as does the set of claims (5a), (7), and (8). Now, I quite agree with Tuggy that it will not do to say that the Trinity is *really* contradictory. There is nothing intellectually virtuous about contradiction *per se*. (There may, however, be a handful of exceptional cases where it is rational to hold genuinely contradictory beliefs, e.g. the paradox of the preface.)[4] We should avoid, if at all possible, falling back on the idea that the law of non-contradiction does not apply when theorizing about God. Nevertheless, an intelligible distinction may be made between *apparent* contradiction and *real* contradiction; thus an intelligible distinction may be made between *apparent-and-real* contradiction and *apparent-but-not-real* contradiction. Let us refer to an instance of the latter as a *merely* apparent contradiction (MAC). Having dismissed as untenable the idea that the Trinity is genuinely contradictory, we are left with the possibility that the theological claims suggested by the biblical data constitute a MAC.

So how should we understand this MAC? By virtue of what, precisely, is the contradiction merely apparent? Aristotle famously stated that something cannot both X and non-X at the same *time* and in the same *sense*. Presumably the temporal qualifier is of no utility here: no-one wants to claim, for example, that sometimes only the Father is God and at other times only the Son is God.

We are therefore left with the semantic qualifier. Aquinas (doubtless inspired by Aristotle) famously stated that when one is faced with a contradiction, one should make a distinction. Of course, when one *can* make the appropriate distinctions, one should do so; but one may not always be in a position to specify those distinctions. Nevertheless, knowing that the relevant distinctions could *in principle* be articulated and explicated is sufficient grounds for distinguishing a MAC from a genuine contradiction. MACs of this kind are thus accounted for by the presence of *unarticulated equivocation* among key terms involved in the claims. For the sake of brevity, I will hereafter refer to an instance of this phenomenon as a MACRUE (Merely Apparent Contradiction Resulting from Unarticulated Equivocation).[5]

Some examples will be instructive at this point. Consider the following two claims:

(A1)   I am concerned about my wife's operation.
(A2)   I am not concerned about my wife's operation.

These statements certainly appear to be inconsistent. Yet, if you were to overhear me making both claims in a short space of time you might well think, (if you took me to be an honest, straightforward fellow) that there must be some alternative explanation for this contradiction than that I was speaking falsely on one or other occasion; you might thus conclude that the contradiction is merely apparent,

even if you couldn't immediately see why. And you would be correct, too, for both (A1) and (A2) were true but involved an unarticulated equivocation on the term 'concerned': I was *concerned* in the sense that I care about my wife's welfare, but I was *not concerned* in the sense that I was not anxious about the outcome (since I knew that the operating surgeon is one of the best in the world). Naturally, once the distinction is articulated and grasped the appearance of contradiction vanishes; yet both of my original claims were true, despite the seeming inconsistency.

As a second example, consider the case of Harry, a Christian layman who has been invited by a friend to attend a lecture given by an eminent Continental theologian. Due to a combination of factors – a previous late night, the stuffiness of the lecture theatre, the monotony of the speaker's voice – Harry's attention drifts in and out during the course of the presentation. At one point, he hears the following claim:

> (B1)   God's kingdom has arrived.

Soon afterwards, he dozes off – only to awaken to catch this second claim:

> (B2)   God's kingdom has not arrived.

Harry's immediate thought is that the lecturer has flatly contradicted himself. Still, being a charitable chap by nature, and working on the assumption that an eminent Continental theologian would be unlikely to exhibit such flagrant illogicality, he quickly concludes that the speaker has in mind a distinction according to which God's kingdom has arrived *in one sense* but has not arrived *in another sense*. Having tuned out for most of the lecture, Harry is unable to say just *what* distinction is operative here, but nonetheless he is justified in believing *that* some distinction is operative and therefore that this is a MACRUE. He reasons that the crucial distinction *could* be explicated (by the source of the claims if by no one else) and the appearance of inconsistency thereby removed. (Harry decides, however, not to pursue this information but to pursue some strong coffee instead.)

One final, subtler example. Reflect on the situation faced by Susan, who is presented with the following two claims about one and the same human individual:

> (C1)   Jamie has an XY chromosome pair.
> (C2)   Jamie is an attractive teenaged girl.[6]

Although (C1) and (C2) do not explicitly contradict in the way illustrated in the previous two examples, there is nonetheless an appearance of contradiction: an *implicit* contradiction. (C1) indicates that Jamie is male, while (C2) implies that Jamie is *not* male. Yet, if someone who knew Jamie well and in the relevant respects (e.g. Jamie's family doctor) were the source of these claims, and Susan

had good reason to believe this person to be speaking truthfully, then she would be rational in taking this to be a MACRUE.

The actual state of affairs lying behind claims (C1) and (C2) is this: there exists a rare medical condition known as *male pseudohermaphroditism* in which an embryo with an XY genotype nonetheless develops physiologically as a female.[7] Thus, the apparent contradiction can be fully resolved once it is understood that there are various distinct senses in which a person can be male or female. In this case, Jamie is 'genotypically' *male* but 'phenotypically' *not male*. Nevertheless, Susan need not be aware of this phenomenon (let alone have any medical understanding of how it occurs) to believe with good reason that (C1) and (C2) constitute a MACRUE.

There are two further points to recognize about a person S who finds herself in a cognitive situation such as this, the relevance of which will become clear later on. First, it does not follow from the fact that (C1) and (C2) appear to contradict (albeit implicitly) that these statements are meaningless for S. Secondly, the appearance of contradiction arises from the fact that S's concepts of *being male* and *being female* are not sufficiently discriminating to enable her to resolve the contradiction: the relatively 'coarse' concept of gender applied by S in her everyday thinking does not distinguish, but rather subsumes, the more 'refined' notions of *genotypic* gender and *phenotypic* gender (which turn out to be only contingently coincident, even if ubiquitously so). As S sees things, then, *being male* implies *having an XY chromosome pair* and also *not being a girl*. Moreover, this limitation in S's conceptual palette does not affect in the slightest her ability to interact appropriately with family and friends in the course of everyday life or prevent her from passing an introductory course in human biology.

These examples show that the notion of a merely apparent contradiction resulting from unarticulated equivocation is cogent and applicable in a range of plausible scenarios. But is it reasonable and fruitful to understand the doctrine of the Trinity in such a manner? Let us see.

Trinitarian doctrine as MACRUE

My basic proposal is that genuine theological paradoxes, such as the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, are best understood as merely apparent contradictions resulting from unarticulated equivocation. The logical conflict in question is rarely, if ever, explicit (e.g. 'the Son is God' and 'the Son is not God') but may constitute a formal contradiction, as seems to be the case with the set of claims Tuggy analyses. In other cases, the perceived contradiction will be merely implicit (but no less awkward for that).[8] Moreover, these apparent contradictions in our formulations of Christian doctrine will be the product of theological theorizing from source data that also strikes us as implicitly

contradictory. After all, the Bible nowhere makes any explicitly or formally contradictory statements about God's triune nature, but rather supplies copious data about God from which we *infer* the sort of neat, succinct set of statements which serve as a formal statement of orthodox Trinitarian belief such as the Athanasian Creed or Tuggy's (1)–(6). Furthermore, these doctrinal inferences are not conducted in an epistemic vacuum, so to speak; they draw on a considerable amount of extra-biblical background knowledge and prior experience about the concepts and categories employed by the biblical text, including natural intuitions about conceptual entailments and metaphysical necessities. As we will see, this fact has significant epistemic consequences.

According to my proposal, paradoxical formulations of the doctrine of the Trinity must involve an unarticulated equivocation on one or more of the terms employed: 'God', 'is', 'divine', 'distinct', 'one', 'three', and so forth, depending on the particular formulation in view. This being the case, it follows that a *formally* consistent expression of Trinitarian doctrine can be constructed simply by explicitly articulating distinctions between the relevant terms: distinguishing 'is_1' and 'is_2', say, or '$divine_1$' and '$divine_2$'. Alternatively, problematic terms can be appropriately qualified so as to eliminate formal inconsistency; for example, the term 'one' can be redefined to accommodate the enumerative oddities raised by the metaphysics of divine personhood (while still applying in the usual way to non-divine persons and other mundane entities). Whatever route is taken, however, the essential point is this: given that we are dealing with a MACRUE, the vocabulary used to express the doctrine can *in principle* be adapted so as to eliminate any formal contradiction.[9]

A question naturally arises at this point. Precisely *which* terms in our formulations need to be distinguished or qualified? Given that a doctrinal MACRUE is susceptible to formally consistent restatement in various ways, *which* of these possible restatements properly captures the truth about God's triunity by locating the crucial distinctions on the correct terms? At the very least, we can say that if we are warranted in taking the doctrine to be a MACRUE (on which, more below) then we know that at least *one* of these restatements must be correct. This implication in itself is sufficient to deflect the anti-Trinitarian charge of falsity due to logical inconsistency; for if the doctrine is a MACRUE, then it must *in the nature of the case* be susceptible to formally consistent expression.[10]

It may be possible to go further, however, should there turn out to be philosophical or exegetical grounds for rationally preferring one formulation over against another. Moreover, it is plausible to suppose that some formulations will be logically equivalent to others. Since the overall meaning of a sentence ordinarily depends on the contribution of every one of its words, a set of statements can often be disambiguated in multiple ways, provided that the qualifications introduced have the same net effect on the formulation as a whole.[11]

Of course, if the doctrine of the Trinity is indeed a MACRUE, then it follows that at least *some* of the terms in our statements about God's triunity must carry equivocal senses with respect to the 'ordinary' senses of those terms. Yet traditional Christian theists should not find this a bitter pill, since it comports nicely with what believers have often wanted to say about theological language. According to the doctrine of analogy (the linguistic version) there is such a vast ontological difference between the Creator and the creation that terms such as 'good' and 'wise' cannot be applied to both God and creatures in precisely the same sense, even though there must be *some* commonality of meaning. In particular, terms applied analogically to God are semantically differentiated in precisely those respects needed to avoid contradiction with *other* claims made about God (that He is immaterial, eternal, unlimited, *a se*, etc.).[12]

With regard to statements of Trinitarian doctrine rendered formally consistent by way of distinction or qualification, then, we can say something along these lines. Whatever meaning ought to be conveyed by those terms designated as carrying analogical senses – 'is', 'divine', 'being', 'one', etc. – the terms will be such that (i) there remains substantial commonality of meaning with same terms used in ordinary discourse[13] and yet (ii) there is difference of meaning at least in those regions where genuine contradiction would otherwise arise with respect to all the *other* things we want to say about God's nature – most fundamentally, with respect to the things *God* says about Himself in scripture. Thus, when Christians affirm with the Athanasian Creed that 'there are not three gods but one God', each of the words exhibits substantial similarity (and in some cases identity) of meaning with the same word used elsewhere, such that the statement can be approximately paraphrased using near-synonyms (e.g. 'there is not a triple of deities but a single deity'); yet there must also be sufficient differentiation of meaning that one cannot correctly infer from this statement (in conjunction with other biblical data) that God the Father took on flesh and bore our sins. The analogous senses of the relevant terms will not permit such a conclusion to be deduced; indeed, it is just *because* the latter proposition is denied by Christians that terms are to be considered analogous and not univocal.[14] Similarly, it is just because genuine contradictions are unacceptable that some pairs of same terms employed in formal statements of the doctrine of the Trinity (or the implications thereof) are to be understood as related analogously *to one another*.

Appealing to mystery

While this construal the doctrine of the Trinity fits well with historic Christian convictions about theological discourse, and allows, in principle, for formally consistent expressions which deflect the charge of logical inconsistency,

there is an important difference with respect to the three examples of MACRUEs proffered earlier; namely, the unarticulated distinctions in those sample cases not only can be *formally articulated* but also can be *cognitively grasped* by us. That is to say, in addition to understanding *that* there is an element of equivocation involved in each case, we can also understand (perhaps with some coaching) *what* the equivocation involves: for example, we can grasp the difference between genotypic gender and phenotypic gender and can therefore understand *how* a person can be both *male* and *not male*. This is not how things go with the doctrine of the Trinity, I suggest, and therefore we are left, like it or not, with a residue of mystery. The question of the day is whether or not this appeal to mystery is rationally acceptable. Tuggy maintains that it is not. In the remainder of this paper, I will try to defuse his objections.

Tuggy distinguishes five senses of 'mystery': (1) the New Testament sense, that of 'a truth formerly unknown'; (2) 'something that we don't completely understand, something whose entire essence we can't grasp'; (3) some fact that we can't fully or adequately explain; (4) an unintelligible doctrine whose meaning we can't begin to grasp; and (5) a truth which one ought to believe 'even though it seems, even after careful reflection, to be impossible and/or contradictory' (175–76). Now which of these types of 'mystery' do I have in mind? At first glance, the last appears most appropriate: I maintain that the doctrine of the Trinity is an apparent contradiction (though the contradiction is *merely* apparent) but it is true nonetheless and ought to be believed. However, this does not quite get to the root of the matter. For if the doctrine is a 'mystery' in the *fifth* sense, it is due to the presence of a 'mystery' in the *second* sense (a species of mystery that Tuggy himself takes to be ubiquitous even within the created universe).

What I mean is this: the doctrine of the Trinity is a MACRUE because of a lack of information and understanding on our part regarding the metaphysics of triunity, resulting in turn from present conceptual limitations (possibly temporary) in our noetic apparatus. The reason our systematizations of what the Bible says about Yahweh, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit appear contradictory to us is because the concepts we naturally employ when expressing those truths are insufficiently discriminating as to allow us to comprehend the very distinctions that would render our formulations logically perspicuous. Indeed, the concepts employed by the writers of scripture themselves are inadequate in that respect; that is just a consequence of the fact that God has revealed Himself to us through human language.[15]

Thus, while the totality of biblical data suggests that God is 'numerically one divinity' in *some* sense and yet not 'numerically one divinity' in some *other* sense, all we have at our cognitive disposal is our common or garden notions of numerical oneness and divinity – concepts which serves us perfectly well in all non-theological matters and nearly all theological matters, but happen to

throw up some odd results when pressed into action for answering certain questions about God's intrapersonal relations. Just as Susan's unsophisticated notion of gender led to the appearance of contradiction among claims about Jamie, some of our intuitive concepts and categories are simply too coarse and indiscriminating to allow us to grasp the distinctions that would lay bare, as it were, the metaphysical connections between the divine essence and the divine persons. God (we may presume) has a perfect grasp of these distinctions and hence can see without difficulty just *how* there is no breach of the law of non-contradiction; we must rest satisfied (at least for now) only knowing *that* there is no breach. In a nutshell, the fundamental 'mystery' here is one of informational limitation rather than logical violation.[16]

Suppose that this account of the doctrine of the Trinity as MACRUE is roughly correct thus far. Does it follow that it is reasonable to *believe* the doctrine? Or is it irrational nonetheless to believe something that appears to be contradictory even if the inconsistency is *merely* apparent? According to Tuggy, one can reasonably believe an apparent contradiction provided two 'somewhat hard-to-specify' conditions are fulfilled:

> First, one must have very strong grounds for believing the claim or claims in question. Second, one must have some reason to suspect that the contradiction is only apparent. Unless these two conditions are met, one ought not to believe any apparent contradiction, for what is apparently contradictory is for that reason apparently false. (176)

Now it seems to me that the second of these conditions will normally be met, at least in part, by way of the first being met. After all, if I have 'very strong grounds' for believing a set of claims that seem contradictory, don't I thereby have good reason to suspect that the inconsistency is *merely* apparent? This principle is certainly supported by the examples of MACRUEs offered earlier. Furthermore, it is plausible to hold that Christians *can* have very strong grounds for believing those claims typically taken to constitute the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity, namely, the fact that each of those claims is implied by an array of scriptural data. If the Bible is indeed inspired by God, and if the Holy Spirit can induce in a person's mind a firm conviction that this is so,[17] then Christians can be warranted in believing both direct biblical claims and also whatever follows from those claims 'by good and necessary consequence' (as the Westminster Confession puts it). In favourable circumstances, those beliefs may be warranted to a high degree.[18]

Even so, there may be additional reasons to consider an apparent contradiction to be merely apparent – or at least, reasons to resist concluding that the contradiction is real. In some fields of inquiry, it may be reasonable to *expect* the appearance of contradiction, at least on occasion. Now, if any field would invite this expectation, surely it would be human inquiry into the very nature of God. According to the doctrine of divine incomprehensibility, although we can know

God partially we can never know Him exhaustively; indeed, the difference between Creator and creature is of such magnitude that what little we do understand of God is but a drop in the ocean compared to God's self-understanding. If such is the case (as most Christians would be inclined to grant) should we really expect our systematizations of what God has revealed to us about Himself by way of limited human language, grounded in immanent experience, to be logically perspicuous at every point? Are we justified in assuming that our creaturely repertoire of concepts and categories, while perfectly adequate for counting peaches and distinguishing postmen from policemen, is sufficiently rich and precise as to accommodate every metaphysical nicety required to formulate the truth about God's transcendent nature in an unambiguously consistent manner?[19] I strongly suspect not. At the very least, we have no grounds for answering affirmatively here; in which case the inference from apparent contradiction to real contradiction is undercut.[20]

I believe an illuminating parallel can be drawn here with recent responses by Christian philosophers to the problem of evil. According to the evidential (or inductive) atheological argument from evil, there are instances of suffering in the world which certainly *appear* to be gratuitous: we cannot begin to imagine what morally sufficient reason God could have for allowing such suffering. Since appearances are not normally deceptive, it follows from the *appearance* of gratuitous evil that probably there *is* gratuitous evil; ergo, probably no omnipotent and omnibenevolent deity exists (since such a being would not allow evil of this kind without good reason). A popular and effective line of response to this argument has been to undermine the inference from appearance to reality by appealing to other features of theism.[21] Given the vast epistemic distance between God and us, should we expect that for any particular instance of evil God's reasons for allowing it would likely be evident to *us*? Is our understanding of good and evil so extensive that we are aware of every kind (or at least most kinds) of greater good, not to mention every way (or at least most of the ways) in which evil can be allowed for a greater good? Surely not. On the contrary, we ought not to be in the least bit surprised to discover that some of God's reasons for allowing evil and suffering evade us.

I contend that something very similar applies with respect to the doctrine of the Trinity (and perhaps to other Christian doctrines). The appearance of gratuitous evil is often taken to be a defeater for theism, while the appearance of contradiction is frequently thought to be a defeater for Trinitarianism. Yet both conclusions are mistaken, because both inferences are unwarranted. Just as acknowledging the epistemic distance between Creator and creature undercuts any inference from the *appearance* of gratuitous evil to the *actuality* of gratuitous evil, so it also undercuts any inference from the *appearance* of contradiction (among claims based on special revelation about God's transcendent nature) to the *actuality* of contradiction.

Assorted objections

Tuggy's article raises various objections to the notion that the doctrine of the Trinity is a 'mystery' (construed as a truth which ought to be believed despite the appearance of contradiction). In this section, I briefly respond to these challenges. No doubt more could (and should) be said on each point, but that must await another occasion.

The contradiction is not merely apparent but clear and explicit

After stating the two conditions which must be met in order for belief in an apparent contradiction to be reasonable, Tuggy comments: 'With our claims (1)–(6) above, or the inconsistent triad (1), (5), (6), the second of these conditions is not met, for the contradiction is crystal clear' (176).

In response, I would point out that the contradiction is only crystal clear on the assumption that all same terms employed in systematizations of the doctrine of the Trinity are to be understood univocally. It is precisely this assumption that I have been at pains to challenge. Indeed, as James Ross explains, the structure of language is such that words will tend to combine and to modify one another's meanings in such a way as to *resist* contradiction: an apparently contradictory statement (or set of statements) will only be a 'hard-core' contradiction when the linguistic environment *mandates* it.[22] Furthermore, we should recall that most of the claims to which Tuggy refers are not taken verbatim from scripture; they are statements *inferred* (however naturally) from the biblical data based on the concepts conveyed by those data (numerical oneness, identity of reference, etc.) and the metaphysical implications that we intuitively associate with those concepts. As such, the charge that there is simply no room for an appeal to *merely* apparent contradiction cannot be sustained.

The grounds for believing the apparent contradiction are too weak

According to Tuggy, 'it is doubtful that we have strong enough grounds for (1)–(6) to swallow the apparent contradiction'.

> The only way we could have strong grounds for (1)–(6) or any version of the doctrine would be if we very reasonably believed it had been revealed by God. Presumably, the doctrine would appear in the Christian scriptures. But in a sense that everyone really familiar with the issue understands, full-blown doctrines of the Trinity are not at all data of the New Testament, but are rather the product of serious, careful efforts to understand what is there, efforts which are ongoing. (176)

What is perhaps most surprising is that these comments appear to contradict what he argues earlier in his article regarding (1)–(6), namely, that each claim is either a biblical datum or else strongly implied by biblical data, except for one element of (5) – the claim that God is numerically distinct from each divine person. Here I must side with the earlier Tuggy over the later Tuggy. There is

excellent scriptural support for the individual components of the doctrine of the Trinity, as any good systematic theology text will document. And if the belief that the Bible is divinely inspired (or at least that the relevant biblical data are of divine origin) can be warranted to a high degree, as Plantinga and others have argued, then so can the derivative Trinitarian beliefs. This in itself can provide reasonable grounds for resisting the inference from apparent contradiction to genuine contradiction.

It is an intellectual virtue to avoid contradictions in our theorizing

Tuggy notes that while a certain pleasure can be derived from meditating on nonsensical or contradictory claims (such as Carroll's 'Jabberwocky' or the koans of Zen Buddhism), the temptation to indulge should be resisted in our theorizing as a matter of principle (178). I wholeheartedly agree with the spirit of this counsel. We should certainly never approve theories that we take to be genuinely contradictory. Moreover, theories that avoid all appearance of contradiction are to be preferred over theories that do not, all else being equal. Nevertheless, I believe I have shown that sometimes the most rational course is to take an apparently contradictory set of claims to be a MACRUE, provided that (i) one is warranted in believing each member of the set individually and (ii) there is a reasonable expectation of MACRUEs arising when inquiring into the subject area in question. Certainly we should continue to strive to express the doctrine of the Trinity in a way that is both logically perspicuous and faithful to the biblical data. But in the meantime, there is nothing inherently irrational about conceding to mystery.

It is no solution simply to withhold belief in some Trinitarian claims

One response to the Trinitarian dilemma, Tuggy suggests, would be merely to *withhold judgement* on one or more of the claims (1)–(6), without going so far as to express outright disbelief.

> For instance, one may withhold on (2)–(4) and (6), because we read 'divine' there in the primary sense which implies personhood. But while we know that there are three *somethings* 'in' God (so this line of thinking goes), we have no idea what they really are. They are somehow analogous to personal beings, but we shouldn't affirm that they are personal beings. We can affirm (1), but we must withhold on (2)–(4) and (6). (179)

Tuggy gives several objections to this purported escape route. First of all, he notes that the New Testament gives the strong impression that Father, Son and Spirit are 'genuinely personal'. I agree – whilst also noting that the Old Testament gives the strong impression that the individual named Yahweh is 'genuinely personal' and, moreover, is uniquely divine. However, scripture does not explicitly *say* that these three are 'persons', and even less does it specify that they are 'persons' in precisely the same sense that Tony Blair is a 'person'. Tuggy

insinuates that if we claim to apply terms to God analogously then we are effectively admitting that we have no idea what God is like; but surely Aquinas and every other advocate of the doctrine of analogy would utterly repudiate such a suggestion.

Secondly, he points out that since (1), (5), and (6) are inconsistent independent of the other claims, only by withholding assent to one of *these* will the problem be alleviated. In fact, we must withhold assent to at least *two* of these, for any pair will together entail the negation of the third. Tuggy is correct – on *his* construal of these claims. But I have argued that Trinitarian claims should not be taken in this way, for when apparent contradiction arises between claims inferred from biblical data we should attribute this phenomenon to unarticulated equivocation (even though our conceptual palette may be unable to accommodate the underlying distinctions). We need not therefore withhold assent to any of these claims; instead, we simply accept that there is an unavoidable degree of imprecision or vagueness in our formulations such that they fail to capture (among other things) the whole truth of the matter regarding the metaphysics of triunity. If our creaturely minds were more conceptually refined, we could grasp and express how the divine essence relates to the divine persons in a perspicuously consistent way; but apparently they aren't, so we can't.

There is *some* withholding to be done, however. Specifically, we ought to withhold certain *inferences* that might otherwise be drawn from biblical claims: for example, we should refrain from inferring from Deuteronomy 6.4 that the Father took on flesh and from Matthew 28.18–19 that Christianity is tritheistic. Likewise, in our systematic statements of Trinitarian doctrine, we should insist that the claim, 'There is only one God', does not imply that in no sense are there *three* distinguishable individuals each possessing full divinity; such an inference, which in other contexts would be perfectly legitimate, is ruled out in this exceptional case by overriding revelational constraints. The point is not that the laws of inference are being violated, but that the metaphysical relations of triunity (which biblical language conveys only approximately) differ in important ways from those relations we associate with our immanent experience. This inferential withholding is not prompted by limitations of logic, but by limitations of knowledge exposed by revelational data. In this way, systematic theology makes its peace with apophatic theology.

Thirdly, Tuggy objects that withholding assent to any of (1), (5), or (6) would open the door to numerous anti-Trinitarian heresies – yet surely one of the main aims of Trinitarian theorizing is to rule out unacceptable positions such as modalism and polytheism. Again, he is quite correct; but as I have already explained, there is no need to withhold altogether any of the claims involved in the doctrine of the Trinity provided that some subtlety is adopted in the way these claims are understood and employed. Nevertheless, the need to exclude heresy raises other questions, to be considered in response to a fifth objection.

The appeal to mystery undermines the project of defining orthodoxy

According to Tuggy, many Trinitarians are muddled in their thinking about claim (5), and end up not taking 'a clear stance' on both (5a) and (5b) – perhaps deliberately, due to a reluctance to face the sort of logical difficulties Tuggy mercilessly drags out into the daylight. Instead, they replace (5) with something like the following:

> (5′)   The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are in some way one and in some way many. (180)

The problem with this strategy is that while (5′) is not clearly inconsistent with (1) and (6), it amounts to a 'shadowy and vaporous claim' which fails to do any useful work: it isn't clear that the combination of (5′) with (1)–(4) and (6) rules out either modalism or polytheism. Surely that will not do. But isn't that what my proposal here boils down to?

I think not. Consider the following formulation of Trinitarian doctrine, into which a formal distinction has been introduced so as to signify (without explicating) the presence of equivocation. (The example is deliberately simplistic for the purposes of illustration, but what follows can be applied *mutatis mutandis* to any alternative formulation.)

> (T1)   God is$_1$ one divine being.
> (T2)   God is$_2$ three divine beings.

In the first place, it is not the case that these claims will have no useful meaning; it is rather that they will have *rarefied* meanings, since at least some of the terms will be related analogously to their counterparts in non-Trinitarian contexts. (T1) asserts something very close to the following claim, in which the term 'is' is taken univocally with the same term in 'Fido is one canine being':

> (T1′)   God is one divine being.

There is substantial similarity of meaning between (T1) and (T1′). However, whatever other semantic differences there may be, (T1) does not imply that the Father is in no sense distinct from the Son; similarly, it does not entail the falsity of (T2). It is true that we cannot grasp the metaphysical niceties underlying the distinction between (T1) and (T1′) and that we cannot see how (T1) and (T2) are consistent in anything but a strictly formal sense (hence the appearance of contradiction). It is important to recognize though that thinking of (T1) *as* (T1′) is *perfectly adequate for our religious belief and practice*: our unrefined conception of God's unity is quite sufficient for us to be able to relate to Him as He desires and requires. In practice, we will tend to 'flip-flop' in the way we think about the Trinity. We will rightly conceive of God as numerically one (much as we conceive of Fido as numerically one) when it is most appropriate and fruitful to do that (e.g. when reflecting on the sin of idolatry) and we will conceive of God as

numerically plural (much as we conceive of the Beatles as numerically plural) when it is most appropriate and fruitful to do *that* (e.g. when considering our response to the love shown by the Father in sending the Son with the power of the Spirit).[23]

How then do we go about excluding heterodoxy, given that we lack a precise understanding of the sense in which Father, Son and Holy Spirit are *one* and the sense in which they are *three*? Consider again the pair of claims (T1) and (T2). (As before, what follows can be applied *mutatis mutandis* to any alternative formulation.) According to this scheme, how would we censure modalism and tritheism? At first it might seem that we would simply *deny* the following claims, taking them to represent the modalist position and the tritheist position, respectively:

(H1)   God is_2 one divine being.

(H2)   God is_1 three divine beings.

But suppose now that some alleged modalist were to reply thus: 'The fact is that I do not affirm (H1) at all; I have merely been claiming (T1) all along!' How could we refute such a reply, given that the relations signified by 'is_1' and 'is_2' are conceptually indistinguishable from our immanent perspective?

The answer here is to admit that this alleged modalist is no heretic at all – at least, not on *this* count. For what the *bona fide* modalist claims is the following:

(H1′)   God is_1 one divine being and God is_2 one divine being.

More precisely, the modalist denies altogether that there *is* any unarticulated equivocation to be acknowledged: God is one divine being and that is the end of the matter; there is no need for us also to say, 'God is three divine beings' (absent some evident and specifiable equivocation). Similarly for the *bona fide* tritheist, who insists that God is three divine beings, period; in no comparable sense is it correct to claim, 'God is one divine being'.[24] And what this suggests, perhaps, is an affinity between Trinitarian heterodoxy and *theological rationalism*: a reluctance to submit human reasoning to the control of revelation and to acknowledge that our minds may not be conceptually equipped to resolve every logical puzzle thrown up by our systematization of the biblical data.[25]

Conclusion

Tuggy contends that neither Social Trinitarianism nor Latin Trinitarianism can offer us an interpretation of the doctrine of the Trinity that is both logically consistent and biblically faithful. I concur. He also maintains that construing the doctrine as an apparent contradiction, justifying its acceptance via an appeal to mystery, is rationally untenable. I disagree, and have tried to defend this position by proposing that the doctrine be understood as a revelationally

warranted MACRUE and showing that this view need not succumb to his objections.

Although Tuggy refrains from spelling out in his article his own proposed solution to the problems of Trinitarian theorizing, one can discern its basic shape by reading between the lines. It seems Tuggy would recommend that we identify only the Father, and not the Son or the Spirit, with God (Yahweh); that is, we accept (1)–(4), (5a), and (6), but also add something like:

> (5c)   God is identical to the Father.

This solution may be logically consistent, but the suggestion that it fits well with the biblical data is subject to serious doubt. It is extremely difficult to see how this position could be reconciled with the uncompromising monotheism of the Old Testament and the strong identification of Jesus with Yahweh by the New Testament writers.[26] My proposal, by way of comparison, has the following virtues: it can accommodate all the relevant biblical data; it avoids violating any of the classical laws of logic; it explains how Trinitarian beliefs can be warranted despite the appearance of contradiction; it allows for the definition and exclusion of anti-Trinitarian heresies such as Sabellianism and Arianism; and it fits neatly with the traditional Christian doctrines of analogy and divine incomprehensibility. I suggest therefore that it is to be preferred.[27]

Notes

1. Dale Tuggy 'The unfinished business of Trinitarian theorizing', *Religious Studies*, **39** (2003), 165–183. Subsequent in-text page numbers refer to this article.
2. Consider also the implications of Revelation 22.13 (cf. 1.8), Jeremiah 23.5–6 and Ezekiel 34.11–24.
3. An anonymous referee points out that '*a* is identical to *b*' does not follow from 'F*a* & F*b*' or from the conjunction of '*a* is called by the name N' and '*b* is called by the name N'. True enough. Yet add to the mix that 'There is only one F' (Deuteronomy 4.6; 1 Corinthians 8.4–6; Ephesians 4.5–6; etc.) and that N is a proper name with a fixed referent ('Yahweh' or 'the LORD'), and claim (8) seems to follow naturally enough.
4. Alvin Plantinga *Warrant: The Current Debate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 145.
5. It is important to note that not all equivocation is *mere* equivocation, i.e. homonymy. Analogy and metaphor are also forms of equivocation, but involving a substantial element of meaning-relation.
6. The adjective 'attractive' is intended to convey that there is nothing in Jamie's physical appearance that would suggest any abnormality, while the adjective 'teenaged' is meant to exclude the possibility of Jamie having undergone gender reassignment treatment. Both of these constraints could be specified explicitly so as to bring out more acutely the phenomenon of apparent contradiction, albeit at the expense of simplicity and rhetorical impact.
7. T. W. Sadler *Langman's Medical Embryology*, 5th edn (Baltimore MD: Williams & Wilkins, 1985), 273–276. At present, the aetiology of this condition is only partially understood.
8. An explicit contradiction arises when some statement and its negation are both affirmed; a formal contradiction arises when a set of statements is affirmed from which an explicit contradiction can be *logically deduced* (typically via first-order logic with identity); and an implicit contradiction is a set of propositions to which some necessary truth(s) may be added so as to yield a formal contradiction.
9. It might be objected that such adaptation is nothing more than linguistic legerdemain designed to eliminate the problem artificially. In a sense, this is true; but as an objection, it misses the point. The artificiality of the distinctions or redefinitions is forced upon us by our limited understanding of

Trinitarian metaphysics, but the procedure itself is warranted inasmuch as our belief that the doctrine is a MACRUE is warranted.

10. A similar dialectical move is frequently employed in defences of the coherence of Christian theism, i.e. arguing that at least one logically consistent model can be constructed for the claims in question, but withholding judgement on whether that particular model is in fact correct.

11. Consider this geometric example. Given that the object O is a cone, the apparently contradictory statements (S1) 'O is shaped triangularly' and (S2) 'O is not shaped triangularly' can be equivalently disambiguated as (S1′) 'O is vertically-shaped triangularly', and (S2′) 'O is not horizontally-shaped triangularly', or (S1″) 'O is shaped vertically-triangularly', and (S2″) 'O is not shaped horizontally-triangularly'. In principle, the contradiction-resolving distinctions could even be incorporated into the terms 'is' or 'O' to the same effect. To extend the analogy with Trinitarian doctrine, consider the epistemic situation of a Flatlander who receives from Spaceland an authoritative 'revelation' about O which includes or implies (S1) and (S2); Edwin Abbott *Flatland*, Penguin Classics, rev. edn (London: Penguin Books, 1998).

12. James F. Ross 'Religious language', in Brian Davies (ed.) *Philosophy of Religion: A Guide to the Subject* (London: Cassell, 1998). For a contemporary defence of analogical religious discourse, see James F. Ross *Portraying Analogy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981). Although space limitations forbid elaboration, Ross's theory of linguistic analogy accords well with my proposal about Trinitarian doctrine.

13. Ross refers to ordinary discourse as *unbound* discourse: discourse that is not bound (with respect to the acceptability conditions of utterances) to the practice of some 'craft' (such as medicine, law, or theology); Ross *Portraying Analogy*, 165–167.

14. In fact, the analogy involved in our systematic formulations of Trinitarian doctrine is *derivative* of analogy found in scripture itself, on the assumption that God is the primary author of the biblical corpus and God cannot contradict Himself. For whatever meaning is conveyed by words of the affirmation, 'The LORD our God, the LORD is one' (Deuteronomy 6.4), it cannot be such as to contradict (whether taken alone or conjoined with other biblical statements) the affirmation, 'There is but one God, the Father … and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ' (1 Corinthians 8.6). The same principle applies for all biblical data relevant to Trinitarian doctrine.

15. To clarify, I am not claiming is that the humanness of biblical language *entails* that our theology will be apparently contradictory (an evident non sequitur) but rather that it *explains* any seeming inconsistencies that might arise in our systematizations. Thus, my proposal does not give Christians a licence to posit paradoxes gratuitously throughout scripture; rather, it offers a last-resort strategy for handling a paradox when it cannot be avoided.

16. It might be objected that our notions of identity, individuality, numerical unity, and suchlike, are too fundamental and clearly understood to be susceptible to the sort of imprecision posited here. Certainly they *appear* clear to us and present no difficulties (or very few, at any rate) when applied to mundane objects; but such observations hardly count against my proposal, for it is this very fact that accounts in part (so I claim) for the logical perplexities of Trinitarian metaphysics. Besides, these concepts have been subject to too much serious controversy in the history of philosophy for our intuitions about them to be thought utterly irreproachable.

17. Alvin Plantinga *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 241–266.

18. According to Plantinga's analysis of warrant, the *degree* of warrant a belief enjoys depends on the strength or firmness with which that belief is held; *ibid.*, 156. Presumably if the Holy Spirit instigates the formation of some Christian belief, He also has some hand in how firmly that belief is held.

19. If our cognitive faculties are the product of divine design, as Christians would naturally affirm, then the design plan for those faculties will inevitably involve trade-offs and compromises as various desiderata (accuracy, efficiency, simplicity, material realizability, etc.) are balanced against one another; *ibid.*, 38–40. It is hardly a given that one of God's design priorities was to equip us with minds able to rationally penetrate His intertrinitarian relations.

20. There is arguably a further reason for supposing that our cognitive faculties might be limited in ways that would give rise to the occasional theological MACRUE, namely, that such a scenario would promote the virtues of epistemic humility and faith (cf. Proverbs 3.5; Job 11.7–9).

21. Stephen J. Wykstra 'The Humean obstacle to evidential arguments from suffering: on avoiding the evils of ''appearance''', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, **16** (1984); William P. Alston 'The

inductive argument from evil and the human cognitive condition', in James E. Tomberlin (ed.) *Philosophical Perspectives 5: Philosophy of Religion* (Atascadero CA: Ridgeview Publishing, 1991); Peter van Inwagen 'The problem of evil, the problem of air, and the problem of silence', in *ibid.*; Plantinga *Warranted Christian Belief*, 465–481.

22. Ross *Portraying Analogy*, 79.

23. On a related point, the fact that the propositional content of (T1) and of (T1′) are indistinguishable from our human perspective explains why biblical support for (T1′) may also be considered support for (T1). In general, if E is evidence for some *relatively imprecise* claim P, then E provides equal support for every member of the set of *more precise* claims S = { *x* : *x* implies P }, provided that E is not sufficiently detailed as to favour any member of S over any other member.

24. Modalists and tritheists typically maintain that there *is* a sense in which God is three and one, respectively. The point, however, is that they also insist that these senses can be *readily specified and explicated*, such that any appearance of contradiction is eliminated. An anonymous referee asks why modalists or tritheists could not consistently appeal to mystery along the lines described here. No doubt they could; but surely for those who embrace modalism or tritheism, any such appeal would be redundant.

25. Thus J. N. D. Kelly refers to Arius and his ilk as 'rationalists at heart', while Philip Schaff remarks of Arianism and Athanasian orthodoxy, respectively, that 'the one made reasonableness, the other agreement with scripture, the criterion of truth'; J. N. D. Kelly *Early Christian Doctrines*, 5th edn (London: A. & C. Black, 1977), 243; Philip Schaff *History of the Christian Church* (New York NY: Charles Scribner, 1910), vol. 3, ch. 9, §123.

26. It is worth noting that anyone attempting to express a commitment to monotheism in conjunction with such a scheme will be forced to admit an equivocation (articulated or otherwise) on the word 'divine' and related terms.

27. I wish to thank David Byron for several stimulating discussions that contributed to the formation of the ideas expressed in this paper.