THE PERFECT THREE : ONTOLOGY AS TRINITY

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ABSTRACT

The Ontological Argument for the existence of God is briefly examined with particular reference to its basic premise, the assumption of the perfection of God. Despite some problems with the idea, it is believed that perfection is a valid concept. The thrust of the article is that if a perfect God exists, such perfection requires at least the basic concepts of the doctrine of the Trinity. The author therefore believes that the idea of the Trinity is derivable in a rudimentary form without reference to either revelation or to the "vestigia" (the supposed reflection of the Trinity in the creation), but simply from the idea of perfection. Some authors, both medieval and modern are cited in support of the argument.

1. INTRODUCTION

In our modern pragmatic world the doctrine of the Trinity is regarded as a superfluous piece of mumbo-jumbo, incomprehensible and unnecessary to the modern world (Moltmann, 1981:1; Welch, 1953:3f etc). It would be inconceivable that any serious heated argument about such "irrelevancies", as broke out in the fourth century, could seriously take place today. It has little significance for the lives of most individual Christians, who are in practice monotheistic (Rahner, 1970:10). This is particularly due to the rise of historical criticism which attached the revelatory basis of the doctrine especially in the Gospel of John, and due to the influence of Schleiermacher (Welch, 1953:3).

Nevertheless the doctrine deserves prominence. Despite seeming irrelevance, it did grow out of the Christian experience of God (Fortman, 1982:xiii). Thus in today's Charismatic experiences, where there is a danger of falling into error of a Trinitarian nature, there is a need to be clear concerning our doctrine of the Godhead. I am thinking here, for example, of such ideas as believing that we are in the age of the Spirit (cf. Montanus or Sabellius) or of using the name of Jesus as a "talisman" to extract favours from God. Both of these are fairly common in some circles. Welch (1953:227) remarks on the various Unitarianisms, centering on different persons of the Trinity which have occurred in history.

The idea of God's perfection is also not acceptable in today's culture, due to the evolutionary philosophy which pervades much of modern thought. Everything is perceived of as in a state of change, so that the notion of an absolute in any sphere is not regarded as tenable, rather, all is viewed as relative to something else.

Whether these two may be connected in the light of today's culture, more than just in opposition to pragmatism, is a matter that deserves some consideration. What I want to discuss is that they do have a connection, so that the idea of the perfection of God will lead naturally to the essence of the doctrine of the Trinity.

1.1 THE DERIVATION OF THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY

The doctrine of the Trinity is not to be found explicitly in Scripture, but is rather a theological attempt to reconcile what would seem to be its contradictory statements concerning God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Historically the classical formulation came as a result of prolonged theological controversy, very much affected by political pres- sures, during the first four centuries. This cannot be viewed as totally satisfactory, particularly as the then current philosophy affected the formulation, and this philosophy is no longer held as valid in the modern world. Thus Brunner does not give the doctrine the prominence that

Barth accords it (cf. Fortman, 1982:263). This is because the Trinity belongs to theology, not the kerygma, so it is secondary, not an immediate utterance of faith but a combination of such (Welch, 1953:66, 159).

Nevertheless, revelation, as recorded in Scripture, is to be viewed as the root of the doctrine. Perhaps an early hint that even at an early stage this was not viewed as satisfactory is that Augustine, in his work de Trinitate used the concept of the reflection of the Creator in the apex of the creation, man, to illustrate the doctrine, and to make it more comprehensible. This approach continued to be popular in the Middle Ages, where, for example, Anselm preferred the analogy of spring, stream and lake (Barth, 1975:336). From this comes the idea of a "second root" of the doctrine in the three-in-oneness so frequent in creation (Barth, 1975:333f), as well as in man himself.

Such ideas are not popular with modern man. After a lengthy discussion, Barth rejects the validity of any second root for the doctrine, although this conclusion is not accepted by all.

What I want to do is to suggest a third root, taken not from creation, but from the very conception of God. (It is very satisfactory, as will be seen, for "three" to crop up so soon!) This is of course similar to the Ontological Argument where Anselm, and others, argue from the conception of God to show He must exist; I want to go a stage further and say that He must exist as Trinity.

2. THE ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

It is obvious that whether God exists is a subject of extreme importance, simply because of his nature. A person's belief in God's existence or non-existence will inevitably affect his entire attitude to life. So far-reaching is this belief that Pascal, in his famous wager, was prepared to stake all upon God's existence even without adequate proof. For this reason there have been many attempts to prove the existence of God, although not one of them has enjoyed anything approaching a consensus

of approval concerning its validity. Some have fared more successfully than others, but in every case counter arguments have been presented, also of course of doubtful validity, but enough to render each argument non-compelling. Indeed, proof of God's existence has been considered impossible, both as tied up with the validity of any form of natural revelation (Barth), but perhaps more importantly, due to a notion that if God could be proved, the proof would be in some way greater than God, which would be wrong (cf. König, 1982:138). Nevertheless the "proofs" may indeed be valid, and do of course have cumulative effect. (Although, as has been said, three times nothing is still nothing!) They also have a value, once God's existence has been accepted, in relating something of his attributes.

Of these "proofs" the Ontological Argument is unique, in so far as it attempts to demonstrate God's existence a priori, so without any reference to the created order, but simply from the idea of God. Because of its uniqueness, it has occasioned an enormous volume of literature, some of which is of an extremely technical nature.

The Argument itself goes back to Anselm, who, according to Plantinga (1968:ix) actually produced two arguments, although Plantinga suggests that Anselm may not have realized this. Whether such a distinction really exists is, however, a moot point.

2.1 THE VALIDITY OF THE ARGUMENT

The first version of the Argument starts from the premise that God is the supreme being, the greatest possible, "a being than which nothing greater can be conceived" (Anselm). Now what is the greatest conceivable must exist, he argues, as what exists is greater than that which does not. Descartes took this a bit further by arguing that existence itself is a perfection, so that if God is perfect, he must exist (Plantinga, 1968:ixf). It is this form of the argument which was attacked by Kant (Plantinga, 1968:xii), who pointed out that our conceptions of things that exist, and things which do not exist are identical, so that existence is

not a predicate. Existence therefore adds nothing to our conception. My comment here is that this is generally so, but Anselm did not state that it was necessary to actually conceive of what God is like, but only that God is the greatest that can be conceived of at all (Sontag, 1962:40). (The greatest conception possible is of course God's own idea (Barth, 1960:29), which brings a nice circularity to the argument.) Others (Plantinga, 1968:xii) have pointed out that God is proved in this argument essentially by definition, so that by defining God as perfect, one "proves" his existence. This is a point to which I must return.

The second version makes a distinction between two kinds of existence, in the mind and in reality. Now whereas anything can exist in the mind, its definition may be such that its existence in reality is rendered impossible. The classic example of this is the square circle; it is quite possible to define it in the mind, but by so doing its real existence is precluded. The opposite idea applies to God. By defining what is meant by God, his non-existence becomes impossible. Here again the definition includes the idea of God as a perfect being (Plantinga, 1968:xvii).

Discussion on the Argument has produced a variety of conclusions. These range from the attempt of Findlay (Plantinga, 1968:IIIf) to produce a similar argument which will prove God's non-existence (on the grounds that God should, by definition, be inescapable; since He is ignored, He can not exist), to the acceptance by such as Hartshorne and Malcolm (Plantinga, 1968). Barnes (1972:80), dealing with the argument from the view of logic writes:

> Thus I conclude that Anselm's version of the Ontological Argument
> is not probative. It is, I think, a valid argument; I have not shown
> that its premises contain falsity. But there is no reason to accept
> it as a proof of theism, since there is no reason to believe a pre-
> supposition of its first premiss, namely the proposition that there
> is just one thing than which nothing greater can be imagined.

Barnes is saying here that if the premise is accepted, then the existence of God follows. He does not find proof for this premise (although he may in fact believe it), but certainly cannot disprove it either. Spinoza

(Ethics Pt. 2 def. 6) is saying the same thing: "By reality and perfection I understand the same thing".

2.2   THE PERFECTION OF GOD

The belief that God is necessarily perfect is a cardinal feature of Greek theology and as such has influenced theological thought to the present. Thus, for example:

> [God is]... the being which itself is perfection and so the standard of all perfections (Barth, 1957:322).

> Absolutely free...from all imperfections (Berkhof, 1958:57).

Greek theology did have problems with the Biblical perspective, seeing such references as to the repentance of God as incompatible with God's perfection. However, it is recognized that change (e.g. in repentance) need not signify imperfection, but is in fact necessary if God is to be faithful in changing circumstances, which is the essence of immutability. The Bible does present God as perfect, but not as the Greek conception. Examples in the Old Testament are Deut. 32:4, Job 37:16, 2 Sam. 22:31, Ps. 19:7, where the emphasis falls not on the nature of God himself but upon what He does.   A similar viewpoint is found in the New Testament eg. Matt. 5:48. The idea of "greater than all" is the closest in the Bible to the notion of perfection, so excluding the idea of the absolute that belongs to Greek theology.

More consistent with the Biblical picture is, however, that God, rather than being perfect, which puts him on a level with creation, is "incomparable" (König, 1982:20 who cites such texts as Is. 40:18). Nevertheless, unless we use analogy to some degree, we cannot say anything at all about God.

More to the point is that, particularly in a moral sense, any idea of "perfection" that we have is derived from God. This will have the effect

of reducing the Ontological argument to a tautology: God is defined as perfect, and what is perfect is conformity to God.

However, the tautology is not complete. We have a conception of perfection, which itself is derived from God. This is not to say that our conception itself is correct, but the very fact that we do think that something is perfect does suggest an entity causing that conception (as the feeling of hunger suggests the existence of food). It is worth noting here that Anselm believed God is perfect by revelation. The idea forced itself on him (Barth, 1960:76).

Such an understanding of perfection is incompatible with another set of ideas which would render the Ontological argument unworkable due to the crumbling of its premise. These are the notions that God is not in fact perfect. (The immediate problem is then the measurement of the standard of perfection.)

The issue therefore is not so much whether the Ontological Argument follows validly from its premise, but whether the premise itself is correct. This was self-evident for Anselm, but is challenged today from a number of perspectives.

Firstly, is there such a thing as perfection? Such things as length would appear to be infinitely extendable; no absolute is possible but only a measure of relativity. Secondly, even if there is a perfect, is God perfect, or is He rather to be seen as less than the ideal? Thirdly, is it possible to compare everything, so as to say that one thing is more perfect than anything else?

It is clear that in some cases perfection does exist, for example a perfect square is quite possible. It is in other categories that there is a problem, such as length, where something could always be added to "the greatest conceivable". However, even in such categories, the concept of "infinite" is possible and is used in mathematics. We have no empirical evidence that such exists; indeed by the nature of the case an infinite cannot be experienced, but it is a perfectly [sic] valid concept.

Secondly, the idea of God as perfect is also attacked in the process theology of A.N. Whitehead and C. Hartshorne. God is viewed as developing, and does this by experiencing reality, so could not be thought of as perfect in the absolute sense. (Interestingly Hartshorne sees some validity in the Ontological Argument.)

This is not the same as Pannenberg's orientation of God to the future, which is not concerned so much with the being of God, but the knowledge that we have of Him. He is perfect, but we will not know what this perfection entails until the eschatos. This point also answers both the accusation of tautology above and also a frequent criticism of Anselm. To assert that God is perfect does not imply an assertion of what this means in detail ("greater than can be conceived"); but is a qualitative rather than a quantitative assessment.

Here, however, the issue is not whether God is at an absolute state. It is not necessary to say that God is at the pinnacle of any possible perfection, but that, at any time, He is the most perfect. He would always seek to be perfect according to his conception of such, as He would change to fill any perceived lack.

Thirdly, what is meant by "perfection" depends very much on the per-spective of the viewer. It is one thing to assess two pieces of machinery, but entirely another to assess two works of art. To combine the two, how could it possibly be assessed which of two otherwise mechanically identical cars (if that were possible) of different colours was more per-fect? Or, to face another choice, on what basis can two different things, such as a car and a kangaroo, be compared? One is more perfect for one purpose, the other for another (as if "purpose" alone were the only criterion). There can be no absolute. Surely, however, as Anselm's reply to Gaunilo implies, God is so great that whatever comparison is made, God is the most perfect. Different perspectives are possible, but in each, God is the most perfect. Thus it is not necessary to speak of an absolute, but that God is always better, in any category.

These objections basically amount to an understanding of the importance of the observer, and a denial of the idea of an absolute. Neither mate-rially affects the validity of the Argument; in the first case, God is seen

as greatest from any perspective, which only serves to enhance Him, and in the second case, Anselm quite rightly spoke of the "greatest conceivable", and not an absolute, for which the argument is valid.

König (1982:193) also refers to the rejection of God as Almighty (and hence as perfect) for the sake of human freedom. This objection is similarly dealt with, because to say that God is perfectly mighty (quality) does not necessarily mean that He has to use that power (quantity).

What the Ontological Argument did for Anselm, because he spoke from the standpoint of faith, was to sharpen his conception of God as perfect, and as a necessary being. Hick (1973:76f) seeks to make a distinction at this point between two ideas of necessity, that of logical necessity, which is seen in the first aspect of Anselm's argument (but not the second) and exemplified in Descartes, which since Kant is untenable, and that of factual necessity. (The point here is that logic can deal with hypothetical matters, from which other will necessarily follow, without any basis in real existence.) Hick prefers to treat the existence of God in this second sense. "He just is" (Hick, 1973:89). However, he also says (1973:88):

> That God is, is not one fact amongst others, but is related asymmetrically to all other facts as that which determines them.

However, if God does exist as the origin of things that are, perfection must be, almost by definition, conformity to God. Here again we have the tautology: what is perfect must be God, and the idea of perfection necessitates the existence of God. What is more relevant to this discussion is the further corollary of the nature of this perfect God.

To say that God is a necessary being does not simply say that He is, but must include how He is, so it should be possible to see the Trinity in the idea of perfection which comes directly from the idea of necessary existence. Thus we take our notion of perfection, which is derived directly from God as the determination of all, to deduce what God is like.

2.3 THE COROLLARY OF THE ARGUMENT

Descartes developed his form of the Argument for what would seem the obvious reason, to convince himself of the existence of God. Anselm, on the other hand, had a different purpose. Since he presented his argument as an address to God, it would seem that he was already convinced. Indeed, his position as Archbishop would support this. His argument was then rather an attempt to understand, and thus to be more joyfully satisfied (Barth, 1960:20). He perceived God as existing necessarily because He is perfect, and thus God is more worthy of praise than an entity who does not exist necessarily.

I want to suggest that if the argument is indeed valid, then it indicates also that God exists as a Trinity, and so is more worthy of praise than a simple monad. The premise of the Ontological Argument is the perfection of God. If this is valid, it not only leads to a proof of the existence of God, but that such a God is a Trinity.

This to me is significant, as one of the drawbacks of the traditional arguments is that they do not "prove" the kind of God that Christianity proclaims. There is a difference, as Pascal complained, between the God of the Bible and the god of the philosophers.

3. ATTEMPTS TO DERIVE THE TRINITY WITHOUT REVELATION

There have been some attempts to suggest that God is Trinity simply from the nature of God. There are those of Hugh and Richard of St. Victor, and of Bonaventure.

Hugh saw the essence of the Trinity in relation (cf. Augustine). For him the Trinity comprises the totality of relationships: "For there is one who is from no-one, and one who is from him, and one who is from both and with both, so there is Trinity...." Nevertheless he derives the doctrine

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from revelation, but says it is thus in accordance with reason (Fortman, 1982:189).

Richard goes a step further. Denying the opinions of others that the Trinity is a strict mystery, he feels that it can be rationally demonstrated, although not from reason alone. Fortman (1982:193) says of him:

> a divine person must have supreme charity, and it cannot have this for a created person. Hence there must be in God a plurality of divine persons. Must there be only two? There must be a third. For "in mutual love there is nothing rarer, nothing more excellent, than that you wish another to be equally loved by him whom love supremely and by whom you are loved supremely" (de Trin. III:II).

In de Trin. V:II, Richard seeks to limit the persons to three ("for otherwise there would be irrationally an infinite processional series").Fortman (1982:194) comments, "It must be rather obvious that Richard's analysis of charity does not result in an urgent proof of the presence of three and only three persons in God".

What is, however, significant in Richard is that he derives the Trinity from the idea of the Absolute (love, beatitude, power) in God (Franks, 1953:133). A third person only is needed to complete the blessing of the mutual love of the two. (Is this an argument for polygamy?) (Richard can also be seen as a forerunner of the Social Trinity of Hodgson, although Hodgson makes no reference to him.)

It is Bonaventure who most fully developed this idea, again from a presupposition of perfection. He argues:

> In God there must be 'beatitude, perfection, simplicity, primacy....If there is supreme beatitude, then supreme concord, supreme germanity and supreme charity. But if there were more than three persons there would not be supreme germanity, if less not supreme charity' (in Sent. 1, d.2, a.1, q.4). If there is 'supreme perfection then the producing person produces perfectly both as regards the mode of producing and the one produced. But there are only two noble modes of producing, for every agent either

acts by way of nature or by way of will (Aristotle, 1.42 Phys.
II.6).... And the person produced by either of these two ways
is most perfect. But if everything beyond perfection is superfluous
and everything less than perfection is defective, it is necessary
that there · can be only two emanating persons... and one from
whom they emanate and therefore only three persons' (ibid.)
(Fortman, 1982:213).

Most, however, have seen no inherent reason for the Trinity. The great
Augustine, despite his attempt to see vestigia in the most likely place,
that is, in man, the apex of creation (Gen. 1 :27), can be criticized for
in general making the Spirit less than personal. "et ideo non amplius quam
tria sunt; unus diligens eum qui de illo est, et unus diligens eum de quo
est, est ipsa dilecto" (Augustine, de Trinitate VI 7 -"and therefore there
are not more than three, One who loves Him who is from Him, One who
loves Him from whom he is, and the love itself") (Hodgson, 1943:152).
(Hodgson denies that the ideas of procession and spiration are in fact
really a part of the Trinitarian doctrine.) Augustine thus presents the
Spirit as the mutual love between Father and Son, so a relationship, and
although he does see "relation" as all that distinguishes the persons,
really finds himself more at home with a Binity. Hodgson (1943:153),
however, urges that he does seek to maintain the full personality of the
Spirit.

Indeed the official Catholic viewpoint is now that the doctrine is a mys-
tery, so that it is only accessible by means of revelation, by faith
(Fortman, 1982:289), so that reason cannot even demonstrate it after
revelation, although it can progress to some understanding. Aquinas,
although he believed that the existence of God is demonstrable by reason,
did not feel the same about the Trinity (Hodgson, 1943:24). Klein puts
the official position: the Trinity is an absolute mystery, so not demon-
strable, not discernible nor can an adequate idea of it be formed by
reason; nevertheless reason can achieve a very useful understanding,
and auxiliary conceptions, indeed can penetrate it indefinitely (Welch,
1953:105).

From a very divergent viewpoint, the same thing is said by Barth
(1975:312):

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... revelation is the basis of the doctrine of the Trinity; the doctrine of the Trinity has no other basis than this.

He sees a natural co-equal three-foldedness in the very concept of revelation, so derives the Trinity simply from the concept of the revealing God, therefore puts it at the head of his dogmatic system (Barth, 1975:295f, 334).

Welch (1953), surveying the doctrine of the Trinity, mentions a number of thinkers who have sought to investigate the doctrine outside of the revelation context. In particular, Hegel, deriving the Trinity simply from reason, appealed to the idea of Spirit as eternally self-differentiating and resuming, "disrempting" and reconciling. God, as pure thought requires an object of that thought, or an Other. Nevertheless Hegel thus appears to confuse generation and creation (a frequent difficulty in the Early Church) and to have a deficient Christology (often a test of an adequate Trinitarianism) in that only Christ perceived the unity of God and men (Welch, 1953:11f).

More recently Hartshorne has seen three basic elements in God: reflexive transcendence, absolute perfection (unsurpassability) and relative perfection (surpassability) (Welch, 1953:77). Thornton feels that reason confirms (not produces) the doctrine, for if creation alone is the object of God's love, God is not eternal. He rejects a modalistic idea of God, seeing in the multiplicity of God no barrier to His unity, as long as God is perfect, as it is imperfection which produces individualism (Welch, 1953:80f). Sayers sees the Trinity in artistic production (idea, activity, power) (Welch, 1953:86).

In these, especially in Hegel and Sayers, a reflection of Augustine is clearly visible. Welch remarks appositely that all cannot be right. Making particular reference to Thornton and Sayers, he notes the totally different results (Thornton requires persons, Sayers a single person only (Welch, 1953:92)). He remarks also:

It is significant that we are unable to cite from contemporary literature any noteworthy example of a purely philosophical

trinitarianism, that is any argument for the trinitarian nature of
God which claims to be independent of revelation (Welch, 1953:90).

Perhaps Tillich's attempt is closest. He does start from a premise of the
perfection of God, but attempts to relate all the doctrines of God to the
structure of being itself, which for him emerges naturally in a Trinitarian
form. Thus he sees a 3-fold expression of Being, Existence and Life,
or of Infinite, Finite and the unity of the two, etc (Fortman, 1982:267).
However, he does urge that it is doubtful if we can speak meaningfully
of the existence of God, for that would put God into human categories
of understanding (Hick, 1973:75), and hence limit Him. God's "exist-
ence", therefore, must be more perfect than ours; the Trinity must be
by nature inconceivable; by saying this he is, however, in line with
Anselm's argument.

4. THE PERFECTION OF GOD IMPLIES TRINITY

What is significant in these various arguments is how prominent the idea
of perfection in God is, but as an auxiliary concept to the derivation of
the doctrine, rather than as central to it.   However, if God is indeed
perfect, this very perfection involves at least the rudiments of the doc-
trine.

4.1 PERFECTION IMPLIES THREE-NESS

One comes back to the old argument of the vestigia, as we perceive the
fundamental nature of reality as perfect because God made it, irrespective
of whether there was a fall or not, and remark concerning the threeness
in the very fabric of the matter, such as the 3 dimensions and electrical
charges (proton, electron and neutron), or even the fact that only a
3-legged object (not 2-, 4-, or more) is inherently stable. It is impossible
for us to conceive a more perfect way of doing things.   However,

three-ness is inherent not just in the creation as in the "vestigia", but in the very fabric of being. I am not just seeking reflections of three-ness but saying that three-ness itself is perfect.

Fundamentally, there is a natural feeling within us (particularly from a materialistic background) that bigger is better, or more specifically, that plurality is more perfect for us than simple singularity. To try to avoid simple materialism; as Augustine implied, if God is perfect, he must love perfectly, and this means at the very least duality (cf. the quotation made above), although Richard of St Victor did see three-ness in this aspect of God. More recently Bartlett, arguing from the perfection of God, says that this demands personality and plurality of persons. Champion also stresses that personality implies plurality (although he assumes God's personality is like ours). Both are really proponents of the social Trinity; God is interconscious (self consciousness leading to sin), Bartlett pointing out that in perfection there can be no barriers to unity (for Bartlett and Champion, cf. Welch, 1953:97f).

These thinkers are continuing to emphasize, with Anselm and Augustine, the priority of the idea of relationship in thinking of the Trinity. It has been frequently pointed out that a single monad must be imperfect before creation as having nothing with which to have a relationship. The idea of the Trinity fills this imperfection by enabling relationship before cre-ation, so that God is not seen to create just to fill a need in Himself. Whether this needs three-ness for completeness is doubtful, although at least possible, just as the marriage relationship is fulfilled with a child (where more than one child makes no fundamental difference).

Moltmann (1981:33) moreover says, "In order to be completely [perfectly] itself, love has to suffer". This of course leads us back to Augustine's dictum that it is better (i.e. more perfect) to have fallen and to have been redeemed than never to have sinned at all. Now if this is true, the old arguments against Sabellianism, and in particular Patripassianism, will lead us directly to plurality in the Godhead. It is perhaps no accident that Anselm, the originator of the Ontological Ar-gument, was also the architect of the commercial theory of the atonement, which of course necessitates plurality. (There is perhaps a further con-

nection of ideas in that the Ontological Argument involves the idea of
infinity, which is also present in the infinite merit earned by Christ.)

This in itself merely in general leads to plurality. However, the idea of
three-ness has always been associated with perfection and completeness.
Delling (1972:216) notes the importance of the number in the ancient
world: a threefold repetition makes an act definitive. For Philo, three is
always perfect (Delling, 1972:217). Barth (1975:337) remarks on its im-
portance in non-Christian religions, but feels that this is probably due
to the three-foldedness of the human family. Hemer (1976:687) also notes
that three has widely been thought a sacred number, although he says
that "specifically religious uses of it in the Bible seem to be relatively
few". On the other hand Gunner (1982:844) says: "Numbers are also used
[in the Bible] with a symbolic or theological significance". A glance at a
concordance indicates the connection of three-ness and perfection. To
give just a few examples: the need of 3 witnesses (Deut. 19:15), 3 fes-
tivals a year, the 3 days' journey into the wilderness (Ex. 3:18) and
particularly the multiplicity of occurrences of 3 in the architecture of the
Temple. To this should presumably be added references to 7 (as 3+4
(which also has connotations of perfection in the sense of completeness
for obvious reasons (Gunner,1982:845))), and to 12 (as 3x4). (I have
deliberately made prime reference here to the Old Testament, as there
is a possibility that the New Testament's numerology, such as Paul's love
of triads (eg. faith, hope, love) was influenced by some idea of Trinity.)

It is, however, necessary to move beyond Biblical examples as they may
simply reflect culture, although they are relevant insofar as man, and
in particular his culture, reflects the nature of God (Gen. 1:26). It is
perhaps better to see the perfection of these in natural phenomena, such
as the three-legged stool, although even this is suspect. The whole
concept of the vestigia is questionable in any case, but there is a need
to move beyond simply seeing a pale reflection of God in a creation which
is far from perfect. There is a need to move beyond things to concepts
which should be independent of anything else; although it is hard to
visualize a world without the inherent three-ness mentioned above. Thus
attempts to communicate with other planets have relied on the most uni-
versal of languages, mathematics. Here a case may be made out, tenta-
tively, for the greatness of three, in that it takes 3 lines, a triangle as

the minimum to enclose anything at all, whereas a greater number of sides adds nothing but loses simplicity. Moving to three dimensions does not materially change the position. The simplest figure now has four faces, each of three sides (giving the seven and twelve as above). As a second example, the motion of a body at a particular time may be perfectly described in terms of just three parameters; speed, direction and mass. It has further parameters such as spin, distortion, shape etc. but these are not relevant to an observer. It is three, and three alone, which is basic.

If mere numbers are considered, it is not necessary to simply treat bigger as better. There is really no significant difference between two large numbers as they tend to infinity. Again they loose simplicity, which was one of the attractions that Judaism and Christianity had over the polytheism of the Greeks. More particularly, such logic is defective as it suffers from thinking of perfection only in a quantitative sense, that is, what is perfect must have everything (which is Descartes' argument). To take relevant examples; a perfect source and a perfect receiver are incompatible, which is why God, as perfect, is both, but by means of a Trinity; also to have perfect experience, God must be transcendent and experience the creation, so become incarnate again demanding a Trinity.

4.2 ONE AS PERFECT

The association of unity with perfection hardly needs to be commented upon as it is so common. Hence of the major religions, Islam and Judaism, and to some extent Hinduism and Buddhism all emphasize "God" as one. The root of the idea is of course that if there are two, then they must be different, and if so one must be inferior to another. Conversely, if one is inferior, as Arius claimed, this immediately destroys the unity of God. Only one can be perfect. Similarly Anselm in his Ontological Argument avers that what is composed of parts cannot necessarily exist (Plantinga, 1968:15). Thus the early Fathers were driven to declare that relation was all that distinguished the persons of the Trinity. It is therefore arguable that Anselm, for example, following Augustine, is not

genuinely Trinitarian. By reducing the difference between the persons to that of relation only, they are really no different from simple monotheists. ("In God all things are one except where there is opposition of relation" (Anselm, approved by the Council of Florence 1439, quoted in Welch 1953:109).)

Again speaking mathematically, the unit, one, has attributes no greater number has by virtue of its simplicity. It exists, which the zero has trouble doing (the Ontological Argument is visible here), but then is not restricted by the existence of, and therefore the need to relate to, any other, such as in multiplication or division.

4.3 GOD AS THREE AND ONE

On the one hand, therefore, the three-ness of God is seen as the most perfect, but on the other, God's unity. At the first glance this seems to be contradictory. The answer is rather from the point of perception. As seen above, God must be seen to be perfect whatever point of view is adopted. If unity is preferred, then God is one, but if plurality, then God is three. But God must be seen to be the greatest from all perspectives according to the Ontological Argument; hence God is both three and one. Moltmann (1981:148) again remarks that in dealing with the Trinity, an approval "from above" (that is from a philosophical viewpoint) always starts from the unity of God whereas an approach "from below" (that is from the Biblical perspective) starts from threeness. So Hodgson remarks that unity comes from reason and the Jewish background, trinity from revelation (Welch, 1953:158).

Traditional theology thus distinguishes between the "Persons" and the "Essence" to maintain both three-ness and unity.

4.4 PERFECTION IMPLIES MOVEMENT

The old Greek idea was that God must be immutable, for, they reasoned, any change must be from perfect to something different, which must be less than perfect. The consequences of that idea for early Christian theology are well known, and have led to an appreciation that immutability is expressed not so much in the negative attributes of limitlessness which were associated with it, but in the positive attributes such as faithfulness, consistency (that is, again a shift from quantity to quality). Indeed Moltmann (1981:45) urges: "...the lack of any creative movement would mean"an imperfection in the Absolute". Here he is thinking of the creation of men, but the statement is equally relevant to generation and procession in the Godhead. Nevertheless, the idea of perfection did not exclude motion for Plato and Aristotle (Sontag, 1962:100), as is clear later in the argumentation of Aquinas. (His fourth way does not suggest that God is an absolute, but is rather a variant of the cosmological argument. He is referring to quantities such as size, or, specifically, heat, rather than quality (cf. Kenny, 1969:81).) Aquinas here sees the Trinity in the two possibilities of extension of the self, by word or by love. (That is by emotion and intellect. Scotus says by nature and by will. This distinction comes from Aristotle (Fortman, 1982:xxi).) This will, however, leads to three not two, as the existence of two pure entities implies a third, the combination (as positive and negative must give rise to a third, the neutral). Hence we get three actions in God, those of creation (word), spiration (love) and generation (word and love). There is of course a reflection of Augustine here.

It will also be clear that perfection will involve the "filioque", as completeness requires three states, that of total giving (the Father) total receiving (the Spirit) and both giving and receiving (the Son). Moltmann (1981) tries to derive a multiplicity of ordering of persons (F-S-HS, HS-F-S etc) but this will tend to destroy the inherent relations, and thus their perfection.

It is interesting to note that Hodgson, writing from a modern viewpoint, and thus influenced by evolutionary relativism, denies the existence of

generation and spiration and also thus of the "filioque" problem (Hodgson, 1943:102 etc).

4.5 PERFECTION IMPLIES ETERNITY

For the ancients this was obvious, so Arius thinking of the Son (so having an origin) immediately conceived of him as imperfect, so subordinate. Similarly Augustine, who felt that God must be immutable, or He could not be perfect (Sontag, 1962:37). What is desired is to avoid any idea that God could at all be limited, in this sense by time. Although it has been felt that God in some way is outside time, as his spiritual nature means that he transcends space, our understanding of time does not in fact see this as a possibility. Time as such does not exist, but is a way in which change is noted. It is not a thing which may be transcended, but the idea of eternity means that it may be encompassed.

4.6 PERFECTION IMPLIES MOVEMENT AND ETERNITY

Just as God as greater than all must be at the same time three and one, so God must be moving and eternal, two ideas which seem on the surface equally contradictory, but again depend on the point of view of the observer. To be greater that all, God must be static and unchanging; but to be greater than all, God must be dynamic and moving. These two are combined in the thought of Origen, who, in order to exclude any idea of change in the Godhead, stated the notion of eternal generation. (He also applied this to his ideas of creation with less fortunate results.) Although Origen tended to be subordinationist in his theology, towards the end of the Arian controversy the idea of eternal generation (and by logical extension, eternal procession), was seen as a way of retaining the ideas of sonship without implying subordination. Thus the idea of an eternal process is a way of synthesizing two apparently contradictory ideas.

5. CONCLUSION

It is my contention, therefore, that if the idea of God as perfect is re-tained in theology, this does lead logically to the essential elements of Trinitarian doctrine. Whether this would be so clear if we did not know what we were aiming at is another matter; Schopenhauer treated the Ontological Argument itself as a bit of a joke (Plantinga, 1968:vii) albeit a "charming" one, because he saw existence introduced as one of the premises of the Argument (Plantinga, 1968:65). (In the same way Spinoza defined God as one who necessarily exists (Plantinga, 1968:70).)

Perhaps, however, the last word should be given to Thomas a Kempis, (Franks, 1953:1) who spoke from a conception of God as perfect: "What will it avail thee to argue profoundly of the Trinity, if thou be void of humility and are thereby displeasing to the Trinity?

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