

Ahistoricity in Analytic Theology

by: Beau Branson

Abstract. Analytic theology has sometimes been criticized as ahistorical. But what this means, and why it is problematic, have often been left unclear. This essay explicates and supports one way of making that charge while simultaneously showing this ahistoricity, although widespread within analytic theology, is not essential to it. Specifically, some analytic theologians treat problematic doctrines as metaphysical puzzles, constructing speculative accounts of phenomena such as the Trinity or Incarnation and taking the theoretical virtues of such accounts to be sufficient in themselves to defend traditional doctrines with no need for additional, historical premises. But due to the different epistemic structures of metaphysical and theological puzzles, I argue that importing this methodology into philosophical theology results in invalid or question-begging arguments, and it is unclear how a virtue-centric methodology could be repaired without collapsing into a more historical methodology, which some of the best (but unfortunately not all) analytic theologians follow.

I. Introduction

We can understand certain arguments in philosophical theology regarding what I will call “problematic” doctrines (i.e., apparently contradictory doctrines such as the doctrine of the Trinity or the Incarnation) as disagreements about what the logical forms of those doctrines really are. But this raises the question: If we disagree about the very logical forms of the doctrines themselves, how are we to use the tools of logic to evaluate them?

Not much attention has been given explicitly to this methodological question,¹ but the literature reveals that many analytic philosophers dealing with problematic doctrines seem to share certain methodological assumptions, on which a problematic doctrine can be treated as something like a metaphysical “puzzle.” The methodology centers around giving what I will call an “account” of a certain phenomenon (e.g., the Trinity or the Incarnation) that has the virtue of

¹But see now John Keller and Joseph Jedwab, “Paraphrase and the Doctrine of the Trinity,” unpublished, for an exception, the main points of which I find eminently plausible.

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being logically consistent, and usually other theoretical virtues as well. Accounts are supposed to be compared and evaluated on the basis of their theoretical virtues, and the consistency and other theoretical virtues of the accounts are taken to show the consistency and theoretical virtue of the related doctrines. I call this methodology the “virtue approach” and its followers “virtue-ists.”

Although I believe sense can be made of this methodology in the context of metaphysical puzzles, I will argue that, in the context of philosophical theology, if the conclusions of such arguments are supposed to be that the problematic doctrines are consistent, then they are either invalid or question-begging.

After explaining the virtue approach and exhibiting the invalidity of the arguments it produces, I will show why it is unclear how virtue-ists could shore up their methodology without collapsing into a more historical methodology, which I would advocate. Unfortunately, I will have space to give only a very brief, not a detailed, characterization of what I call the “historical approach.” So this paper’s conclusion is a merely negative one—that the virtue approach on its own does not have the resources to answer the question whether a problematic doctrine is logically consistent.

My argument, however, is not intended to indict analytic theology generally, since an analytic theologian need not necessarily be a virtue-ist. Indeed, after explaining the problems with the virtue approach, I will give Peter van Inwagen as an example of one of the best analytic theologians, and one who, though it may come as a shock to some, clearly rejects a purely virtue-based, ahistorical approach in favor of essentially the kind of history-based approach I would advocate.

Furthermore, the problem I am raising is not so general as, say, the paradox of analysis. It does not discredit any attempt whatsoever to analyze or defend a doctrine. It is only a recognition that a certain (albeit large and visible) subset of “defenses” of doctrines offered by analytic theologians are at worst logically invalid or question-begging, and at best unclear about their aims. I do not attempt to show that there is anything wrong with bringing all the tools of analytic philosophy to bear on clarifying theological doctrines or even in giving a (certain kind of) defense of them. Indeed, I consider myself to *be* an analytic theologian, though not a virtue-ist. For example, elsewhere, I make use of various tools of analytic philosophy to show that Gregory of Nyssa’s trinitarian theology is logically consistent.² But of course, since I write as a historicist (as I will call a follower of the historical approach), the historical role of Gregory of Nyssa is key to my overall argument.

²Beau Branson, “Gregory of Nyssa’s Unity of Nature Argument as a Successful Defeater-Defeater,” unpublished.

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Finally, I note that there is another identifiable methodology in the literature, dubbed “mysterianism” by Dale Tuggy.³ But this approach does not seek to answer whether a doctrine is logically consistent. Rather, it takes up the question whether it is in some sense epistemically acceptable to believe in a doctrine despite the unresolved appearance of contradiction. Thus, it constitutes not so much a rival methodology to the historical approach and the virtue approach, but a methodology that aims at a different goal. I will not have space to address mysterianism in this paper, so I will have to focus only on the negative point about the virtue approach.

II. The Doctrine of the Trinity as a Case Study

It will be useful to take the doctrine of the Trinity as a concrete example of a problematic doctrine, though it should be obvious how my remarks would apply to the Incarnation and indeed generalize to any theological doctrine that appears to be logically inconsistent. Following Cartwright,⁴ let’s consider the set (P) of propositions expressed by the following set (S) of sentences (all propositions which seem essential to the doctrine of the Trinity):

- (S-1) The Father is God.
- (S-2) The Son is God.
- (S-3) The Holy Spirit is God.
- (S-4) The Father is not the Son.
- (S-5) The Father is not the Holy Spirit.
- (S-6) The Son is not the Holy Spirit.
- (S-7) There is exactly one God.

Of course, there is more to the actual doctrine of the Trinity than P (for example, that the persons are consubstantial, that the Father begets the Son, while the Father is unbegotten, etc.). But P is what the so-called “Logical Problem of the Trinity” (hereafter LPT) focuses on, so we will focus on it as well. Interpreting the above sentences straightforwardly, an anti-Trinitarian may claim P has the logical form of inconsistent claims about three things being identical to a (fourth?) thing named “God,” but being distinct from one another, as in LPT₁:

- (LPT₁-1) $f = g$
- (LPT₁-2) $s = g$

³See Dale Tuggy, “The Unfinished Business of Trinitarian Theorizing,” *Religious Studies* 39 (2003): 165–83.

⁴See Richard Cartwright, “On the Logical Problem of the Trinity,” in *Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1987), 187–200.

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(LPT₁-3) $h = g$

(LPT₁-4) $f \neq s$

(LPT₁-5) $f \neq h$

(LPT₁-6) $s \neq h$

(LPT₁-7) $(\exists!x)x = g$

Or an anti-Trinitarian may claim that P is an inconsistent set of claims predicating some property (“being God” or “being divine”) of three distinct things, but there being exactly one thing of which that property is predicable, as in LPT₂:

(LPT₂-1) Gf

(LPT₂-2) Gs

(LPT₂-3) Gh

(LPT₂-4) $f \neq s$

(LPT₂-5) $f \neq h$

(LPT₂-6) $s \neq h$

(LPT₂-7) $(\exists!x)Gx$

Both of these are inconsistent. So one way to think of the LPT is as the question of how, or whether, P could be anything but a contradiction, given all of this.

But a Social Trinitarian might say that what we name “God” is *the collective* of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, thus, something distinct from all three of these but which is still in some sense “divine.” However, this does not mean the Trinity is really a quaternity. The collective God is “divine” in a different sense than that in which the three persons are divine. Thus, the Social Trinitarian (at least implicitly) claims that P has the logical form of ST:

(ST-1) G_1f

(ST-2) G_1s

(ST-3) G_1h

(ST-4) $f \neq s$

(ST-5) $f \neq h$

(ST-6) $s \neq h$

(ST-7) $(\exists!x)G_2x$

And a Relative Identity Trinitarian might say that it is one thing to say that x is “the same God as” y, but something else to say x is “the same person as” y. Thus, he might claim that P has the logical form of RI:

(RI-1) $f =_G g$

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(RI-2) $s =_G g$

(RI-3) $h =_G g$

(RI-4) $f \neq_P s$

(RI-5) $f \neq_P h$

(RI-6) $s \neq_P h$

(RI-7) $(\exists x)(\forall y)(x =_G g \ \& \ [y =_G g \rightarrow y =_G x])$

An Arian would interpret S differently still. He would say that the persons each have different natures, so that “is God” is ambiguous, potentially expressing any of three distinct properties, but that *on any admissible precisification* of “is God” there is exactly one God. Thus AR:

(AR-1) $G_1 f$

(AR-2) $G_2 s$

(AR-3) $G_3 h$

(AR-4) $f \neq s$

(AR-5) $f \neq h$

(AR-6) $s \neq h$

(AR-7) $(\exists!x)G_i x$ [for any admissible precisification of G_i in this context, i.e., G_1 , G_2 and G_3]

Of course, the Arian interpretation fails to be orthodox, but it succeeds in being consistent.

So, there are both consistent and inconsistent, orthodox and unorthodox ways of reading these claims that give rise to the appearance of logical contradiction in P. How, then, would we know which one is the *right* way to read the logical forms of these claims? If we disagree as to what the logical form of P is in the first place, how could we show it to be either consistent or inconsistent?

III. The Virtue Approach

The essence of the virtue approach is that it attempts to answer this question indirectly, so to speak, through the examination of what I call “accounts” of the Trinity. As applied to the doctrine of the Trinity, we can characterize the virtue approach as seeking to prove P to be consistent by:

1. providing some fairly explicit account A of the Trinity,
2. showing that A is consistent (and, optionally, that it has various other theoretical virtues),

and, a critical distinction from the Historical Approach,

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3. supporting A on the basis of its consistency and/or other

theoretical virtues and *not* on the basis of historical considerations.

What I call “accounts” are given various names by different authors, but they are all recognizably the same sort of thing. An account of the Trinity is just some more or less clear story about how the Trinity “works.” Much like a philosophical paraphrase, an account will in some sense go beyond P, but seems intended to preserve the philosophically important content of P while somehow explaining or clarifying that content so as to show how it is consistent. Thus, an account is supposed to (at least implicitly) provide a proposed logical form to attribute to P. The logical form implicitly attributed to P by account A is just the logical form had by whatever aspects of A are supposed to serve as interpretations of S, or at least be analogous to them (as discussed in the next paragraph).

Accounts run a wide gamut. Some are clearly meant to be taken merely as analogies: for example, Brian Leftow’s story about a time-traveling Rockette who dances, then travels back in time and dances with herself (raising the question whether we have one Rockette or two on stage).⁵ Leftow naturally does not take the Trinity to *be* a time-traveling Rockette, but presumably takes it that aspects of this story are logically consistent and logically isomorphic to the aspects of P that create the appearance of contradiction. Other accounts contain detailed philosophical explanations of the metaphysics allegedly involved in the Trinity, along with discussions of semantic links between these explanations and corresponding linguistic expressions in S. For example, Moreland and Craig’s version of Social Trinitarianism seems to be intended as the literal metaphysical truth about the Trinity, along with some discussion of the semantics of analogous predication to obviate objections to equivocating on the predicate “is God.”⁶ Finally, some accounts seem to fall somewhere in-between mere analogy and literal explanation. For example, Mike Rea and Jeff Brower, in their “Material Constitution” account say only that “we can think of” the divine essence as “playing the role of matter” and “we can regard” what traditionally are called the *idiomata* (“the properties being a Father, being a Son, and being a Spirit”) “as distinct forms instantiated by the divine essence, each giving rise to a distinct Person.”⁷

⁵Originally in Brian Leftow, “A Latin Trinity,” *Faith and Philosophy* 21 (2004): 304–33.

⁶See J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, “Christian Doctrines (I): The Trinity,” in *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 575–96.

⁷See Jeffrey Brower and Michael Rea, “Material Constitution and the Trinity,” *Faith and Philosophy* 22 (2005): 57–76. I say this account falls in-between mere analogy and literal explanation, since it provides a richer understanding of how P could be true than a mere analogy, yet Rea and Brower don’t appear to want to commit on whether their account is the literal metaphysical truth about the Trinity.

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Whatever type of account we are dealing with, once account A is explicated, the methodology is to show that A is consistent and perhaps that it also has other theoretical virtues the author identifies as desiderata. This is supposed to somehow be definitive of the “success” of an account. Importantly, the other major defining feature of the virtue approach is what the virtue-ist then does *not* do: discuss the historicity of the account.

IV. The Ahistorical Nature of the Virtue Approach

In examining the ahistorical nature of the virtue approach, it may be useful to give at least a very brief statement of the historical approach in contrast. Although complicated in its implementation, the historical approach is simple in its essence. A doctrine is a proposition. The logical form of a proposition is determined by its content. The content of a *named* proposition (“Marxism,” “Calvinism,” “Stoicism,” “Empiricism,” “Christianity,” “the doctrine of XYZ”) depends on what proposition is referred to by that name. And the reference of that name is determined, in a familiar, Kripkean sort of way, by historical facts fixing the reference of that name to that proposition.⁸ So in this case, the historicist claims that the correct logical form to attribute to P (or the doctrine of the Trinity more generally) will be whatever logical form is actually had by the proposition that the phrase “the doctrine of the Trinity” actually refers to—which may or may not turn out to be consistent, depending on the historical facts that fix the reference of that name to that proposition.⁹ In the current case, “the doctrine of the Trinity” presumably inherits the reference of phrases like “*doctrina Trinitatis*,” the references of which, in turn, were fixed historically to certain beliefs about the Trinity held by the actual authors of the doctrine of the Trinity—mainly various fourth-century theologians. Because of this, the historicist does not attempt to find a solution to the LPT in an *a priori* way.¹⁰ On the historical approach, whether the doctrine of the Trinity is consistent or inconsistent can only be determined by “directly” examining the doctrine of the Trinity itself, i.e., the actual referent of the phrase “the doctrine of the Trinity”—to borrow van Inwagen’s words below, “what has historically been called ‘the doctrine of the Trinity.’” And since references are determined historically,

⁸This is not to say that Kripke’s account of naming in particular is the correct one, nor that such an account is *necessary* to the historical approach. Rather, the claim is that any account of the reference of names that involves historical facts in similar ways would be *sufficient* to require a historical approach.

⁹For various reasons, I assume that phrases such as “the doctrine of the Trinity,” like “the Holy Roman Empire,” function as names, not definite descriptions.

¹⁰It may be that “*a priori*” and “*a posteriori*” are not the most precise descriptions to use here, but I hope the distinction I am pointing towards will be obvious enough.

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this will involve at least an implicit reference to the relevant reference-fixing historical facts. Thus, on the historical approach, we must admit to the anti-Trinitarian that, without begging the question, the consistency of this (or any) doctrine cannot be determined *a priori* solely on the basis of theoretical virtues but must involve historical investigation. This is for just the same reasons that the referents of names in general (Marxism, Stoicism, the doctrine of double effect, etc.), and therefore facts *about* the referents, cannot be determined *a priori*,¹¹ but must involve historical facts. (For these reasons, perhaps one might argue we could substitute the “semantic externalism approach” and the “semantic internalism approach” as names for the historical approach and the virtue approach, though I think the reference to history and theoretical virtues is in some ways more descriptive.)

In contrast to this, on the virtue approach an account is judged on the basis of various *theoretical virtues*. A good example of the sorts of criteria virtue-ists give for a successful account of the Trinity, as well as the way in which they believe it possible, even desirable(!) to set aside certain historical concerns, is given by the once-but-no-longer-Trinitarian, Dale Tuggy, who writes:

The doctrine of the Trinity has a long and interesting history. . . . In this paper *I will avoid as much of this post-biblical tradition as I can*, along with its Latin and Greek terminology. I do this not out of disrespect, lack of interest, or a mistaken belief that folks from the distant past have nothing relevant to say, but only because I want to focus on the most difficult philosophical problems facing various versions of the doctrine, *problems which are often obscured by historical concerns*. . . . I want to focus on three basic problems which threaten Trinitarian theories: inconsistency, unintelligibility, and poor fit with the Bible. . . . These are apparent problems for various versions of the doctrine, but are they real problems? Is there a doctrine of the Trinity which is *consistent, intelligible, and scripturally kosher*?¹²

¹¹At least, when such facts are expressed by predicates applied to these names. One might know *a priori* that various Predicates F, G, H, etc. apply to the proposition that there should be no private ownership of the means of production, say. But one would still not know that F, G, H, etc. apply to Marxism, unless one knows what proposition the name “Marxism” refers to.

¹²Dale Tuggy, “Unfinished Business,” 165–6, emphasis mine. The talk of “Trinitarian theories,” “various versions of the doctrine,” and “a doctrine” points towards a confusion common among virtue-ists that my argument will center around: Namely, in speaking of these “theories,” “versions of” the doctrine, “a” doctrine of the Trinity, and so forth, virtue-ists seem to intend to refer to various *accounts* of the Trinity proposed by virtue-ists. But, as I will argue, there is no reason *a priori* to think that just any *account* of the Trinity succeeds in being a *version* of the doctrine of the Trinity. See note 15 below.

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Tuggy does well in noting that he avoids the relevant history “not out of dis-respect,” etc. Yet he still considers it possible to avoid discussing the history of the doctrine of the Trinity to a great extent while still providing an adequate discussion of it. Indeed, he seems to think it not only possible but preferable. In his words, the relevant philosophical problems are “often *obscured* by historical concerns” rather than being *illuminated* by them.

Next in the methodology, with account A explicated, and after listing his favorite theoretical virtues (for Tuggy, consistency, intelligibility and biblical fit), the virtue-ist believes that if he can demonstrate A is consistent, and has his other favorite theoretical virtues, this is sufficient in itself to show the coherence of P.

Another clear example, and even more explicit statement, of this methodology is found in Peter Forrest’s “Divine Fission: A New Way of Moderating Social Trinitarianism.”¹³ Forrest spends almost the entirety of his paper explaining what he calls his “speculation” about (i.e., account of) the Trinity, arguing for its coherence and showing how it satisfies various other desiderata. Only briefly does he touch upon methodology: “I grant that the above argument is just the sort of thing that brings metaphysics into disrepute. How could anyone know, readers might protest, about such matters? . . . I grant that all this is speculative. But *in order to defend a moderate Social Trinitarianism it suffices to provide a speculative metaphysics which is no worse than its rivals.*”¹⁴ He never fully explains, however, in what sense he intends to “defend” Social Trinitarianism, or from what. Nor does he explain what relation his speculation (account) about the Trinity might bear to the historical doctrine of the Trinity itself. One imagines what he means by “defend” is to prove that the doctrine of the Trinity itself is consistent. But without saying anything about the relation between his speculation about the Trinity and the doctrine of the Trinity itself, “providing a speculative metaphysics which is no worse than its rivals” (even if that includes successfully showing it to be consistent) does *not* suffice to show that the doctrine of the Trinity itself is consistent. For one would also have to show that one’s account is, say, identical to, entails, is logically isomorphic to, or is in some way appropriately logically related to, the doctrine of the Trinity itself. Otherwise, what we have is simply a *non sequitur* of the form “A is consistent. Therefore, P is consistent.” The anti-Trinitarian, then, could just admit that Forrest’s account is consistent, while maintaining that the doctrine of the Trinity itself is inconsistent, since they may be logically unrelated—or, for all we know, even logically incompatible.

For example, as noted in section II, Arianism is also an account of the Trinity—a description of how the Trinity “works”—that provides a logically

¹³Peter Forrest, “Divine Fission: A New Way of Moderating Social Trinitarianism,” *Religious Studies* 34 (1998): 281–97.

¹⁴Forrest, “Divine Fission,” 293, emphasis mine.

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consistent reading of S. But it would be absurd to say that Arianism is a “version of” the doctrine of the Trinity, or that it counts as a “defense” of the doctrine of the Trinity. In fact, it is logically incompatible with the doctrine of the Trinity. (Otherwise, how could it count as a Trinitarian heresy?) So, since at least some accounts of the Trinity (interpretations of S) are logically incompatible with the doctrine of the Trinity, not just any account of the Trinity counts as a “version of” or “defense of” the doctrine of the Trinity, contrary to what virtue-ists seem to assume.¹⁵

With that in mind, why shouldn't the anti-Trinitarian agree with everything Forrest has to say about his *account*, but conclude that Forrest's (apparently consistent) account of the Trinity must simply be *better than* the (apparently inconsistent) doctrine of the Trinity? From all his discussion contains, we can validly conclude, at best, only that Peter Forrest's personal account of the Trinity is coherent—not that the doctrine of the Trinity itself is.

V. Could the Virtue Approach be Fixed?

The above, then, is the historicist's objection to the virtue approach in a nutshell: it produces *non sequiturs*. But what's worse, it isn't clear what could be added to these arguments to get them into a valid form. Not in a way that both:

1. allows the virtue-ist to give us good reasons for thinking his premises are *true*, and
2. would not, in doing so, simply collapse into the historical approach, or in any case render superfluous the whole business of constructing accounts of the Trinity (a defining feature of the virtue approach, since the theoretical virtues are *had by* the accounts).

To make the argument valid, the virtue-ist must demonstrate that there is a very particular sort of relation between his account A of the Trinity and the doctrine of the Trinity itself (or at least P).

Specifically, it needs to be some relation that, so to speak “transfers consistency” (or whatever other virtue) from one proposition to another. We could give a more precise definition as follows:

For any relation *r*, *r* is a *consistency transferring relation* (CTR) iff:

For any propositions *p* and *q*, if *p* bears *r* to *q*, and if *p* is consistent, then *q* is consistent.

For example, identity, logical entailment, and logical isomorphism are all CTRs.

To use account A to show the consistency of P, the virtue-ist needs to show that:

¹⁵See note 12 above.

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1. A is consistent, and
2. there exists some relation r such that
 - (a) r is a CTR, and
 - (b) A bears r to P.¹⁶

From those two premises, plus the definition of a CTR, it follows that:

3. P is consistent.

Call this argument (really a general argument schema) the “virtue-ist argument.”¹⁷

Virtue-ists have provided lengthy explanations of their preferred accounts of the Trinity, and arguments that these accounts are consistent. So let us simply grant, for argument’s sake, that all virtue-ists are always successful in supporting step 1 of the virtue-ist argument—that any given virtue-ist’s account A will be consistent (indeed, that it will have whatever other theoretical virtues the virtue-ist likes as well—intelligibility, good biblical fit, plausible metaphysical presuppositions, simplicity, etc.). But step 1 isn’t the problem. The problem comes in supporting both parts of step 2 simultaneously.

It’s trivial to find relations that A bears to P (e.g., the “I mentioned X before Y” relation), taking care of 2b. But pick any relation r we know that A bears to P, and ask how one would *show* that r is a CTR. How indeed, unless r is just some well-studied logical relation, like entailment, identity, or isomorphism?

But in that case, we would really be starting with step 2a, some r we already know to be a CTR. Fine, then. Let’s start with 2a and pick some known CTR. Now we have to address step 2b and ask how one would *show* that A bears this relation to P. How indeed, without explicating enough of the logical form of P that one could simply determine its logical consistency without the need for A, making A superfluous? Let me now explain this worry in further detail.

We can show, for example, that A bears the logical entailment relation to “it’s raining or not raining,” because we can show that every proposition does, because we have an independent way (independent of the consistency of A) of showing that “it’s raining or not raining” is a tautology, and that everything entails a tautology. Similarly, we have an independent way of showing that a contradiction entails any proposition. But the doctrine of the Trinity is not a tautology, and (we are assuming) the virtue-ist’s account is not a contradiction.

¹⁶As a bit of logical housekeeping, I am here using “P” to denote the *conjunction* of the propositions expressed by S, rather than the *set* itself. I will not mark such switches in what follows, as it will hopefully be clear enough from context.

¹⁷Perhaps it would be better to use the “virtue-ist argument,” to refer to the above argument *minus* premise 2, since that is essentially what I am accusing virtue-ists of offering. But the point is to think about what it might look like if the virtue-ist were to attempt to offer an argument that was at least *valid*.

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So our goal will be to show that some *non-contradictory* account entails a *non-tautological* theological doctrine. But how could one do that without explicating *both* the logical forms of the account *and* of the doctrine along with the overlap of their content,¹⁸ in enough detail that we could have just determined the doctrine to be logically consistent anyway,¹⁹ rendering the account superfluous?²⁰ The situations of tautology and contradiction, after all, are the only situations in which the kind of logical relation we need would supervene on just *one* of a pair of propositions.

So the next problem is: How could we come to a sufficient understanding of the overlapping content of the two, without examining the content of the doctrine *directly*, in order to show that the account shares that content? And how could we come to understand the content of, in this case, the doctrine of the Trinity, without examining what the authors of various Trinitarian creeds intended by the creedal sentences that express it? Or at least what the words used in the original (in this case Greek) expressions of the doctrine of the Trinity meant, given the linguistic practices of the linguistic communities of which the originators of the doctrine of the Trinity were a part (i.e., Greek-speaking, fourth-century theologians with a particular philosophical and theological technical vocabulary, stemming from a particular historical tradition)? In other words, won't the virtue-ist need to know precisely the kinds of facts that Tuggy, for example, wanted specifically to avoid discussing? How would the virtue-ist explicate enough of the content of the doctrine of the Trinity without doing exactly the sort of historical work that the historicist claims is essential, but that the virtue-ist wants to claim is at best inessential, at worst a source of "obscurity"? How could we substitute a "direct" inspection of the doctrine of the Trinity with an "indirect" argument going only through an account? In short, how would the virtue approach not simply collapse into the historical approach?

¹⁸What I mean by "overlap of content" is this. For example, " $P \rightarrow Q$ " and " $Q \rightarrow R$ " entail " $P \rightarrow R$," not merely in virtue of their logical forms independently (not just any two conditionals entail just any third conditional), but in virtue of their logical forms *plus* the fact that the first premise shares the same antecedent as the conclusion and the second premise shares the same consequent as the conclusion. Any two propositions with the logical forms of conditionals such that one *has the same content* in its antecedent as and the other *has the same content* in its consequent as a third conditional, entail that third conditional. This is the sort of thing I mean by saying that, to show that A entails P, one would have to both explicate the logical forms of A and P and show certain relevant "shared" or "overlapping" content.

¹⁹Obviously this holds all the more so for identity or logical isomorphism than for entailment.
²⁰Of course, one could show that A entails P in an indirect way, by showing that A entails B, B entails C, C entails . . . P. But eventually we will come to *some* proposition such that we will have to *show* that it entails P, and we will face the same problem.

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VI. An Illustration

Here is another way to see the point. Imagine a debate between a virtue-ist and an anti-Trinitarian. While they disagree about the consistency of P, they would surely agree to one thing: the following is an inconsistent set (by definition).

1. A is consistent.
2. There is some relation *r* such that
 - (a) *r* is a CTR, and
 - (b) A bears R to P.
3. Yet P is inconsistent.

Although the virtue-ist ultimately wants to say that P is consistent, surely he grants that, *prima facie*, P at least *appears* to be inconsistent. (If the virtue-ist thought P didn't even *appear* to be inconsistent, why bother writing a paper defending it?)

So, the anti-Trinitarian will simply say that, since 3 is *prima facie* true, ironically, the more the virtue-ist does to back up 1 (in the absence of saying anything about 2), the more reason the anti-Trinitarian has to deny 2. And that, in turn, means that, the more the virtue-ist does to back up 2a (in the absence of backing up 2b), the more reason the anti-Trinitarian has to deny 2b (or vice-versa). And that means that the virtue-ist must find some way to argue for *both* parts of 2.

Virtue-ists typically seem to just assume that 2 is true, or, as in Forrest's case, explicitly disavow the need for it altogether. But this is untenable. In order both to have a valid argument in the first place, and not simply to beg the question against the anti-Trinitarian, the virtue-ist must back up 2.

Yet, so far, virtue-ists have made no attempt to do so. Indeed, most virtue-ists either spend little to no time explaining what logical relation they believe their account might bear to the doctrine of the Trinity, or, like Forrest, go so far as to explicitly deny the need for any such additional premise.

It is true that many virtue-ists make passing uses of phrases like "model of," "version of," "form of," etc., saying that their accounts bear one or more of these relations to the doctrine of the Trinity. But so far none to my knowledge have ever stopped to explain the nature of these relations in any detail, and certainly not in enough detail to assure us that they both (2a) are CTRs, and (2b) actually hold between their accounts of the Trinity and the doctrine of the Trinity itself.

So, as it stands, all the anti-Trinitarian needs to say is, "I'm not sure what this 'model of' relation is, but if it's some kind of CTR, then it appears that A doesn't bear it to P (because it appears that *no* consistent proposition does, because it appears that P isn't consistent!)" Or "I'm not sure what this 'form of' relation is, but if A in fact bears it to P, then it appears that it isn't a CTR (because

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it appears that *no* relation your consistent account A bears to P is a CTR, because it appears that P isn't consistent!)” In other words, the anti-Trinitarian can simply challenge the virtue-ist to explain what these relations are, in such a way that it's clear *both* that they are CTRs *and* that A actually does bear one of them to P.

On the other hand, rather than appealing to undefined relations like “form of,” “way of understanding,” etc., suppose the virtue-ist chooses a more well-defined logical relation—like identity, logical entailment, or logical isomorphism—to use as a CTR. Or, suppose he gives a definition of “version of” such that a “version” of a doctrine is a superset of the information contained in the doctrine, or in any case such that it could be shown that when *p* is a version of *q*, *p* logically entails *q* or bears some other well-defined logical relation to *q*. Certainly the anti-Trinitarian will then have to agree that we are dealing with a CTR. But of course, now he will just say that, in the absence of any support for the claim that A really is identical to P, really does logically entail P, or really is a version of P (in this hypothetically more well-defined sense), it would appear that A in fact does not bear this relation to P. So once again the virtue-ist argument relies on an unsupported premise that, at least *prima facie*, without further argument, must *appear* to be false.

Finally then, suppose the virtue-ist wants to take up the challenge of actually defending the claim that A bears some well-defined logical relation like identity, entailment or isomorphism, to P. Then to show that A actually does bear such a relation to P, it clearly isn't sufficient merely to say, “I speculate that A is true; therefore, it must be identical to P,” or “My account A has good biblical fit, is intelligible, etc.; therefore, it must be logically isomorphic to P,” and so on. These logical relations between two propositions do not supervene on the consistency or theoretical virtues of just *one* of the pair. So, the anti-Trinitarian—quite correctly—can simply respond, “I agree that A has all of the virtues you attribute to it. But *it appears* that P does not. Therefore, it appears that A does not bear any CTR to P.”

So how could the virtue-ist argue that A does bear some well-defined logical relation to P? Again, it would seem that the virtue-ist would need to explicate *both* the logical form of A *and* that of P in enough detail to show the relation holds. But in doing so, he likely will end up showing enough of the logical form of P that he could have just determined that it was logically consistent *without making reference to A in the first place*. In which case, the whole business of providing a separate account of the Trinity was superfluous.

Finally, the virtue-ist may need to explicate the content shared by A and P.²¹ But how would he do that without doing just the sort of historical work the historicist says is essential, but the virtue-ist claimed was not? How would

²¹See note 18.

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the virtue-ist show us the *content* of P without reference to the historical origins of P (or, more precisely, the relevant reference-fixing facts about P's name and the thoughts of whatever thinkers play a role in fixing that reference)? In short, how would the virtue approach not simply collapse into the historical approach?

VII. An Objection Based on an Analogy to Metaphysical Puzzles

I suspect that the virtue approach may be motivated by some bad analogies, which I want to address now. One objection to my argument is that the LPT (Logical Problem of the Trinity) looks and feels, so to speak, like some of the puzzles often dealt with by metaphysicians—an apparently inconsistent set of propositions that one wants to argue isn't really inconsistent after all. And it seems as though the virtue-ist is just doing what metaphysicians normally do in such cases—giving “philosophical paraphrases” for the puzzling set of claims in an attempt to show how the set could be consistent after all. So, unless the historicist is prepared to argue that the methodology metaphysicians ordinarily employ in these puzzles is flawed (invalidating an enormous amount of literature), why shouldn't the virtue-ist use the same methodology for the same sort of problem?

This analogy between the puzzles of metaphysics and the problematic doctrines of philosophical theology is a bad one, because while they have similar *logical* structures, they have importantly different *epistemic* structures. Let's work with a specific example of a standard metaphysical “puzzle,” one that might initially seem analogous to the LPT—the Problem of Temporary Intrinsic (PTI).²²

Here's a simple way of putting PTI.²³ Consider the set of propositions (P-TI) expressed by the following set of sentences (S-TI):

(S-TI-1) Mr. Stick at t_1 is bent.

(S-TI-2) Mr. Stick at t_2 is not bent.

(S-TI-3) Mr. Stick at t_1 is the same stick as Mr. Stick at t_2 .

Here is one formalization of TI, call it X-TI:

(X-TI-1) Bs_{t_1}

(X-TI-2) $\neg Bs_{t_2}$

(X-TI-3) $s_{t_1} = s_{t_2}$

The “anti-change-itarian” says that X-TI is the most straight-forward way of reading the logical forms of P-TI. But X-TI is inconsistent. So, if X-TI accurately represents the logical forms of the claims in P-TI, then P-TI is inconsistent.

²²See David Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1986), 203–4 ff. for one of the most important contemporary discussions of the problem.

²³Perhaps overly simple if one wanted to discuss it for its own sake. But sufficient for the purpose of analogy.

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But to conclude that P-TI is inconsistent would be absurd. And so meta-physicians offer philosophical paraphrases of claims about change, paraphrases with very different (and consistent) logical forms. And if even one of those paraphrases seems to preserve all the important content of the original claims, then this seems to show, or at least count in favor of the proposition, that the set of claims is consistent after all.

We could say, then, that just as the LPT is the question how P could be consistent, PTI is the question how P-TI could be consistent. And in cases of metaphysical puzzles such as these, metaphysicians do what virtue-ists do in philosophical theology. When offering paraphrases for P-TI, most metaphysicians would agree that, as Forrest says about his Trinitarian account, “it suffices to provide a speculative metaphysics which is no worse than its rivals.”²⁴

In the case of PTI, metaphysicians have constructed various accounts of the metaphysics of change, corresponding to various paraphrases of S-TI. In much the same way that Social Trinitarians say there is a single God and that the persons are not strictly identical to this one God, but are “parts” of the one God, four-dimensionalists say there is a single (four-dimensional) Mr. Stick, and that Mr.-Stick-at- t_1 and Mr.-Stick-at- t_2 are not strictly identical to the one Mr. Stick, but are both (temporal) “parts” of the one Mr. Stick. Thus, the logical form implicitly attributed to P-TI is:

(4D-TI-1) B_{St_1}

(4D-TI-2) $\neg B_{St_2}$

4(D-TI-3) $s_{t_1} R s_{t_2}$

where “R” is some relation that does not entail classical identity (specifically, it is the “is a temporal part of the same four-dimensional object as” relation, or what Quine would call “being stick-kindred”²⁵).

Another proposed solution is that properties are “time-indexed,” so that, while the stick we refer to at t_1 is in fact classically identical to the stick we refer to at t_2 (both are just Mr. Stick itself), the *properties* we are attributing to Mr. Stick at the two times are not the same. Thus, the logical form implicitly attributed to P-TI is:

(TIP-TI-1) $B_{t_1}s$

(TIP-TI-2) $\neg B_{t_2}s$

(TIP-TI-3) $s = s$

Of course, there are other proposed paraphrases, but one gets the gist. With various proposals on offer, the game is to argue that one account is superior to

²⁴Forrest, “Divine Fission,” 293.

²⁵W. V. O. Quine, *From a Logical Point of View* (Harvard University Press, 1961), 66 ff.

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its rivals. (What makes an account superior to its rivals? Precisely the theoretical virtues of the virtue-ist, like not conflicting with common sense, being simpler, not positing too many entities, and so on.)

I am of course presenting the methodology summarily. One might argue *too* summarily, if my task were to argue either for or against it. But my point is only to show how metaphysical puzzles are importantly dis-analogous to allegedly parallel theological problems. So that, even granted the appropriateness of this kind of methodology within metaphysics (and for the record, I *do* accept the legitimacy of this sort of approach in the context of metaphysics), it is not appropriate to import this methodology into philosophical theology.

X-TI, of course, parallels LPT₁ and LPT₂, the readings the anti-Trinitarian offers of S. And the metaphysics of four-dimensional objects with temporal parts or of time-indexed properties parallels proposed solutions to the LPT such as ST and RI.²⁶ This may seem to parallel the way Trinitarian virtue-ists offer different accounts, with different logical forms, of the claims in S.

What, then, is the difference between taking the virtue approach in meta-physics and the virtue approach in theology?

VIII. The Structure of Warrant in Metaphysics vs. Philosophical Theology

Although there is a certain parallel in their *logical* structures, PTI and LPT have importantly different *epistemic* structures. For it is a Moorean fact that P-TI, a description of change, is logically consistent. But can we say that it is a Moorean fact that the doctrine of the Trinity is logically consistent? Indeed, in general, the sets of apparently contradictory propositions dealt with in the puzzles of metaphysics seem to be such that it is a Moorean fact that they are consistent (so that the “puzzle” is why they appear not to be), while in general it is just the opposite with the problematic doctrines of philosophical theology— unless one starts out from a position of believing in them and simply begs the question against one’s opponent. And that is the crucial difference between the application of this methodology in metaphysics versus philosophical theology.

To give credit where credit is due, anyone who has read John Keller’s excellent work on paraphrase will see how very much influenced I have been by it.²⁷

²⁶In fact, four-dimensionalism seems very parallel to Social Trinitarianism, while time-indexed properties seem more parallel to Arianism. But one sees the point.

²⁷See John A. Keller, “Paraphrase, Semantics, and Ontology,” in *Oxford Studies in Metaphysics* (forthcoming), and John A. Keller, “Paraphrase and the Symmetry Objection,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 95, no. 2 (2017): 365–78. For more, see his earlier dissertation, “Telling the Whole Truth: The Role of Paraphrase in Philosophical Inquiry,” PhD Dissertation (University of Notre Dame, 2010).

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And as van Inwagen once wrote of Plantinga on modality, “It is better to be right than original.”²⁸ What I present here as my view on how the virtue approach applies to philosophical puzzles in metaphysics is just a summary of Keller’s view about how philosophical paraphrase in general works, at least as I understand him. Thus, I take no credit for originality here. Nor will I try to defend it, as I have nothing to say to improve on Keller’s own defense of this view. I merely present it as what I take to be the most plausible explanation of how this sort of methodology works in philosophy generally, along with my explanation of why it wouldn’t apply in philosophical theology. The virtue-ist, of course, is free to substitute his own, alternative explanation of how this methodology works in metaphysics. But that must be left to the virtue-ist himself to do.²⁹

What creates a “puzzle” is that we sometimes find the most straightforward reading of the logical forms of each of the propositions individually is such that they would turn out not to form a consistent set when taken together. This creates a scenario in which it really is the case that almost any alternative reading of their logical forms would do.

For example, one might think it counterintuitive that, strictly speaking, a stick is not a three-dimensional object but a four-dimensional object, and that when I say Mr. Stick is bent, I really am only saying that a certain *part* of Mr. Stick is bent. And when I say the stick from t_1 “is the same stick as” the stick from t_2 , I really am only saying that they are “stick kindred,” i.e., that both are temporal parts of the same four-dimensional Mr. Stick. But as counterintuitive as that may be, it’s not nearly so counterintuitive as saying that change is logically impossible. Though my four-dimensional account of Mr. Stick may be as much a “speculation” as Forrest’s account of the Trinity, unless and until some better theory is proposed, the theory of temporal parts gains at least a modicum of credibility from the fact that the alternative is simply intolerable. Thus, one can truly say that, in a case like this, “it suffices to provide a speculative metaphysics which is no worse than its rivals.”

But suppose another alternative to the anti-change-itarian reading can be given that is *less* counterintuitive (thus, *more* theoretically virtuous) than four-dimensionalism—say, time-indexed properties (supposing for argument’s sake that time-indexed properties are less counterintuitive than temporal parts). Then this new theory must inherit at least all the benefits of the first (namely, that it allows us to avoid saying that change is impossible, which was intolerable) but

²⁸Peter van Inwagen, *An Essay on Free Will* (Oxford University Press, 1986), 79.

²⁹I should note that although I have lifted wholesale from Keller the story about how philosophical paraphrase works and the assertion that this is what is going on in metaphysical puzzles, he may entirely disagree with me about my methodological views in the realm of philosophical theology and how I put his account of paraphrase to use. Any shortcomings one might attribute to my views should not be attributed to him.

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with less of the costs (in terms of being counterintuitive), and thus becomes the new winner.

Thus, what drives the virtue approach in metaphysics is a certain *epistemic structure*. It is driven by the existence of significant *prima facie* warrant for an implicit premise that the propositions we are analyzing simply *must be consistent*, so that giving up the game and admitting that it is inconsistent should only be done as a last resort. In other words, we seem to operate with some such argument as Anti-PTI:

1. P-TI seems obviously logically consistent.
2. So, any analysis of P-TI that attributes a consistent logical form to P-TI is *prima facie* more likely to be accurate than one that is not.
3. 4D attributes a consistent logical form to P-TI.
4. X-TI attributes an inconsistent logical form to P-TI.
5. Therefore, 4D is *prima facie* more likely to be accurate than X-TI.

But the same epistemic structure is simply not there in the LPT, nor in the problematic doctrines of philosophical theology generally. Indeed, not only is it not a Moorean fact that the doctrine of the Trinity is logically consistent (the analogue of 1 and 2 in Anti-PTI)—an intellectually honest Trinitarian must admit that, at least *prima facie*, the doctrine of the Trinity appears *not* to be consistent. So we cannot say Anti-LPT:

1. P seems obviously logically consistent.
2. So, an analysis of P that attributes a consistent logical form to P, is *prima facie* more likely to be accurate than one that is not.
3. Account A attributes a consistent logical form to P.
4. LPT-1 / LPT-2 attributes an inconsistent logical form to P.
5. Therefore, A is *prima facie* more likely to be accurate than LPT-1 / LPT-2.

If the anti-*change-itarian* asks us why a four-dimensionalist or time-indexed-property reading of P-TI is preferable to an anti-*change-itarian* reading (that is, if they ask why 1 and 2 in Anti-PTI are true), we can honestly say it is because the anti-*change-itarian* reading has a crazy result. But if the anti-*Trinitarian* asks us why a Social Trinitarian or a Relative Identity Trinitarian reading of P is preferable to the anti-Trinitarian reading (that is, if they ask why 1 and 2 in Anti-LPT is true), we *can't* honestly say it is because that reading has a crazy result.

So the question remains, even if the virtue-ist's account is consistent, why should the anti-Trinitarian attribute the logical form of the virtue-ist's account of the Trinity to the doctrine of the Trinity itself, rather than the inconsistent analysis he began with?

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IX. A Better Analogy?

Consider another analogy, this time to what I'll call the "problem" of So-cratic immortality (PSI), involving the set P-SI of propositions expressed by the natural language sentences S-SI:

(S-SI-1) All humans are mortal.

(S-SI-2) Socrates is a human.

(S-SI-3) But Socrates is immortal.

One regimentation of P-SI is X-SI:

(X-SI-1) $(\forall x)(Hx \rightarrow Mx)$

(X-SI-2) Hs

(X-SI-3) $\neg Ms$

But X-SI is inconsistent. So, if X-SI is an accurate regimentation of the logical form of P-SI, then P-SI is inconsistent. The structure of the argument is like this:

1. X-SI is an accurate regimentation of the logical form of P-SI.
2. X-SI is logically inconsistent.
3. Therefore P-SI is logically inconsistent.

But this doesn't seem like a "puzzle" at all. Suppose I want to defend, for some reason, the view that P-SI is consistent. I propose the following alternative regimentation, O-SI, as a "defense" of my view:

(O-SI-1) $(\forall x)(Hx \rightarrow Mx)$

(O-SI-2) Hs

(O-SI-3) Is

That is, I propose to take the predicate "immortal" as basic, not definable by negating the predicate "mortal," and of course I deny conditionals linking the two terms, so I can consistently maintain all of the propositions in P-SI. *Voilà!* "Problem" solved!

This is, of course, is not a legitimate "solution" to anything. And that is because the epistemic structure is *just the reverse* of PTI. There, the fact that a given analysis of P-TI is consistent gives us reason to think it is *more* likely to reflect the true logical form of P-TI than X-TI was. But in the case of PSI, it is so *prima facie* implausible to think that P-SI is *not* inconsistent, that the very fact that a given analysis of P-SI is consistent gives us reason to think it is *less* likely to reflect the true logical form of P-SI than X-SI.

For PTI, Parmenides himself would admit that the result that P-TI is inconsistent is at least *prima facie* implausible. But for PSI, it is rather the result

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that P-SI is *not* inconsistent that is *prima facie* implausible. Obviously the anti-Trinitarian will ask whether a proposed solution to the LPT is more like a solution to PTI or more like a “solution” to PSI.

Thus, the problem with treating an account of the Trinity as a solution to a philosophical puzzle is that not just any apparently inconsistent set of propositions counts as a “puzzle.” It’s only a philosophical puzzle if it is hard to believe that the set could be inconsistent, yet hard to see how the inconsistent analysis of it could be wrong. But the anti-Trinitarian, quite rightly, will point out that it’s not at all hard to believe the doctrine of the Trinity could be inconsistent— indeed it’s easy! (And likewise for any problematic theological doctrine.)

Let us relate the current point back to the earlier point about CTRs. With a metaphysical puzzle like PTI, nobody is claiming there’s any CTR between their speculative account and a description of an object changing over time. We don’t need to. Rather, it is *assumed* that the target doctrine (in this case, a description of change) is consistent. Or at least that there is a massive amount of *prima facie* warrant that it is. The inference does not begin with there being a CTR between 4D and PTI and lead to the conclusion that PTI is consistent. Rather, the inference begins with PTI being almost surely consistent, so long as that is possible, and with 4D’s showing that that *is* possible, to the conclusion that 4D is more likely to correctly analyze PTI’s logical form than X-TI. But to transfer this type of argument to philosophical theology would require us to begin with the assumption that problematic doctrines are almost surely consistent, so long as that is possible. Thus, if I’m right about how virtue approach methodology works in metaphysical puzzles, *the very assumption that it is appropriate to import this methodology into philosophical theology in itself begs the question against the opponents of problematic theological doctrines.*

X. The Appeal to Theoretical Virtues

We have so far focused on consistency. What of other theoretical virtues? Parallel to consistency transferring relations, we could define various types of transferring relations for various virtues. We could even define overall virtue transferring relations (VTRs) that would transfer any relevant theoretical virtue. But since consistency is a virtue, the set of overall VTRs will be a subset of CTRs, and we’ve already seen the problems with CTRs.

What’s more, even if we did have excellent reason to assume at the outset that P must be consistent (as our discussion in sections VIII and IX suggests we might have to, to make the virtue approach work), an argument of the virtue approach type would not automatically give us reason to suppose that any *particular* virtue-ist’s account is more likely than any other to have the same content as P, substantially similar content to P, or even the same or substantially similar

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logical form as P. All we could validly deduce from a demonstration that A is consistent would be that, barring any other information, A at least *epistemically could be* the same or substantially similar (in content, or in form) to P (while any interpretation of S that is inconsistent certainly could not be). Thus, for example, an ST account would be more likely to be, or be substantially similar to, P than any anti-Trinitarian readings of P (since the probability that an inconsistent reading of P has things right is, on this hypothesis, zero). But the same can be said for an RI account, or any account of the Trinity, so long as it is not inconsistent.

And yet, typically, as we've seen, virtue-ists want to argue in favor of their own account *over* rival accounts on the basis of various theoretical virtues their account has. How are we to make sense out of this?

Some theoretical virtues that virtue-ists discuss are just general theoretical virtues, like being "consistent" and "intelligible." Others would be nice specifically for a bit of theology, like being "scripturally kosher."³⁰ But none of these qualities makes an account of the Trinity any more likely to be the same as or substantially similar to P than any other account—that is, unless one assumes at the outset not merely that P is consistent, *but that it also has all other theoretical virtues*, and has them to the highest, or at least a very high, degree (for any virtue that comes in degrees).

Indeed, unless we make this assumption, showing one's favorite Trinitarian account has *more* of some virtue than a rival account could actually show one's account to be *less* likely to be the same as or substantially similar to P than the rival account. For suppose account A has virtue V at 99 percent and account B has it only at 87 percent. If it turns out that P itself only has virtue V to about 86 percent, then the very fact that A has such a high degree of virtue V actually shows it to be, in that respect, *less* similar to P than B is. Thus, to make sense of this feature of the virtue approach, we would not only have to assume that P has the virtue of consistency, but also has every other theoretical virtue we judge accounts by, and that it has any of those virtues that come in degrees to the highest (or at least a very high) degree.

The question, of course, is whether it is right—and whether it is not blatantly begging the question against the anti-Trinitarian—to assume *a priori* that P must not only turn out to be consistent, but to have all of the relevant theoretical virtues and have them to a very high degree. For just one example, one of the most prominent objections to the doctrine of the Trinity, especially by Jews and non-Trinitarian Christians, is that it isn't biblical. Although I find such objections problematic,³¹ would it not beg the question against the proponents

³⁰See Tuggy, "Unfinished Business," 166.

³¹I discuss this at length in "The Bible, the Trinity, and the Great Apostasy: On the Role of Scripture in Philosophical Theology," unpublished.

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of this line of argument to simply assume at the outset that the doctrine of the Trinity must end up being biblical?

If we set aside features that would count as virtues specifically for Christian theology, and focus only on what would count as theoretical virtues generally, one might argue that *the truth* is more likely to have various general theoretical virtues, and to a high degree, and thus that this all makes sense on the assumption that P is *true*. But then the question is, is it right—and is it not blatantly begging the question against the anti-Trinitarian—to assume *a priori* that P must turn out to be *true*?

XI. An Objection Based on an Analogy to the Logical Problem of Evil

Besides a (bad) analogy to general metaphysical puzzles like PTI, the LPT also looks and feels very much like the Logical Problem of Evil (LPE)—another allegedly inconsistent set of claims that the believer is committed to endorsing. And another defense a virtue-ist could make would be based on an analogy to the LPE. As Plantinga argues,³² all we need to do to defend theism from the LPE is give a “defense,” which in essence is just a proposition that *could be true*, and which serves to resolve the apparent contradiction.

But if the virtue-ist believes what he is doing is analogous to Plantinga’s classic defense against Mackie’s presentation of the LPE,³³ then he has again failed to look deeply enough at the logical structures of these two debates.

In Mackie’s presentation of the LPE, he acknowledges that, by themselves, the claims that God is omnipotent and omnibenevolent and that evil exists do not constitute a formal contradiction. One must add what he calls the “quasi-logical rules,” that an omnibenevolent being eliminates evil when possible and that it is always possible for an omnipotent being to eliminate evil. Plantinga identifies these “quasi-logical rules” as in reality additional premises, held to be necessary truths. He then presents his “Free Will Defense” as a possibly true proposition that, to cut a long story short, shows Mackie’s additional premises not to be necessary truths.

Notice, then, that in this debate, the dialectical structure is precisely opposite to that of the LPT. In the LPE, the two parties *agree* about the logical forms of the various propositions involved. On the other hand, they *disagree* about which propositions the theist is committed to. In the LPT, the two parties *disagree* about the logical forms of the various propositions involved. On the

³²See Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977), esp. 24–48.

³³See J. L. Mackie, “Evil and Omnipotence,” *Mind* 64 (1955): 200–12.

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other hand, they *agree* about which propositions the Trinitarian is committed to (to wit: all of the propositions in P).

Thus, Plantinga's defense against the LPE amounted to the claim that the theist may reject certain elements of an admittedly contradictory set of propositions. Virtue-ist defenses against the LPT amount to claims that the set in question is *not contradictory* after all, though the Trinitarian may not reject any of its elements. In Plantinga's Free Will Defense, a possibly true proposition about free will shows us how the claims that God is omnipotent and omnibenevolent and that evil exists can all be true at the same time by showing how it is rational to reject Mackie's additional premises. But in the context of a virtue-ist's "defense" against the LPT, *there are no additional premises there to reject*. The anti-Trinitarian does not allege that there are *additional* premises the Trinitarian ought to accept that would yield a contradiction—he alleges they are *already* contradictory.

On the other hand, if the virtue-ist is trying to use a possibly true proposition, not to show that some contrary proposition is not a necessary truth but in order to show that a set of propositions that seems contradictory really is not, then this will be a very different kind of argument from the one Plantinga gave, with a very different logical structure than Plantinga's (valid) argument. We would need clarification about how such an argument is supposed to work. Thus, if we try to import the methodology of Plantinga's Free Will Defense into a problem of philosophical theology like the LPT, we meet with a great mystery as to how the logic of it could work, given that the dialectical structure of the LPT is exactly the opposite of the LPE.

XII. A Last-Ditch Defense

I will only briefly mention a final response I have sometimes received to the foregoing argument (mostly from virtue-ists, rather than anti-Trinitarians), and that is that there really is no such thing as "the" doctrine of the Trinity in the first place, because different church fathers had different metaphysics and different views about the unity of the Trinity and so forth. And my discussion above has assumed that the doctrine of the Trinity is some more-or-less well-defined proposition, having determinate content and a determinate logical form, so that there is a fact of the matter as to whether it is consistent, whether it bears certain logical relations to other propositions, and so on.

Of course, if it were true that there is no such thing as the doctrine of the Trinity, or that the doctrine of the Trinity is in some sense too nebulous of a thing to have any determinate logical form, then my discussion would indeed be confused. But only because my discussion is *about* the virtue approach, and because the virtue approach would be *even more* confused than I have argued.

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The virtue-ist wants (presumably) to prove that the doctrine of the Trinity has the property of logical consistency. And it can't very well have that property if it doesn't exist. Nor if it isn't really a proposition (or whatever it is that bears logical properties like that of consistency—let's assume these are propositions). But if the doctrine of the Trinity doesn't exist, or isn't a proposition, then virtue-ist shouldn't be offering "defenses" of its consistency at all. Rather, the virtue-ist should say to the anti-Trinitarian, "You claim that P is inconsistent. What you don't understand is that *P doesn't really exist*." Or, "You think that when I utter the sentences in S, I am asserting inconsistent propositions. That's a mistake. I'm really just emoting/recommending/doing something else of such-and-such a nature." But of course, the virtue-ist doesn't do this, probably because virtue-ists don't really deny the existence and propositional nature of the doctrine of the Trinity. But if a virtue-ist does seriously deny the existence or propositional nature of the doctrine he is claiming to defend, his project is an even greater mystery than it already seems.

XIII. What This Argument Does Not Show

I said at the beginning that the current discussion is not an indictment of analytic theology generally. This is because not all analytic theologians are virtue-ists (indeed, in my view, the best are historicists), and there is nothing about analytic theology in general that makes the ahistoricity (and invalidity) of the virtue approach essential to it. I think it will both bring out that point and perhaps help clarify what I am—and am not—arguing against, to show that, unlike Dale Tuggy and Peter Forrest, who seem to explicitly espouse the virtue approach, Peter van Inwagen (an analytic theologian if anybody is) does not.

On a cursory reading, van Inwagen might seem to be a virtue-ist, as he spends most of the time in his papers on the Trinity and the Incarnation only discussing the logic of relative identity and offers no direct discussion of the historicity of his account. But this is misleading. On closer examination, he accepts the point of the historical approach, or in any case, definitely rejects a purely virtue-based approach. This is especially clear in his second paper on the Trinity, "Three Persons in One Being: On Attempts to Show that the Doctrine of the Trinity is Self-Contradictory." In the abstract, he says, "Enemies of the Church have frequently contended that the doctrine of the Holy Trinity is not only false, but violates various elementary logical principles. In this essay, I show that, on one understanding of the doctrine, this charge is unfounded."³⁴ The talk of "one understanding of" the doctrine might bring to mind something

³⁴Peter van Inwagen, "Three Persons in One Being: On Attempts to Show that the Doctrine of the Trinity is Self-Contradictory," in *The Holy Trinity*, ed. Melville Y. Stewart (Dordrecht: Springer, 2003), 83.

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like the virtue-ist's accounts and their mysterious CTR. Furthermore, he goes on with what might appear to be virtue-ist methodology: "I shall proceed as follows. I shall try to imagine a way of stating the doctrine of the Trinity that has the following feature: when the doctrine is stated in this way, it can be shown not to be self-contradictory."³⁵ Again, talk about merely "imagining" a "way of stating" the doctrine might bring to mind Forrest's "speculation." So, one might imagine he falls squarely within the virtue approach camp. But that appearance is misleading. He follows with:

I shall leave the following question to theologians (for I am a philosopher, not a theologian): Is what I describe as "a way of stating the doctrine of the Trinity" properly so described—or should it be called a way of *mis*-stating the doctrine of the Trinity? I claim only this: a strong case can be made for the thesis that the formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity I shall propose does succeed in being a statement of what has historically been called "the doctrine of the Trinity"; and an even stronger case can be made for the thesis that this formulation is consistent with historical orthodoxy. Even if these theses are false, they are, in my view, plausible enough to be worthy of a considered refutation.³⁶

Thus, van Inwagen acknowledges that any given attempt at a "restatement" of the doctrine of the Trinity could end up being a *mis*statement of the doctrine of the Trinity. In other words, *contra* the virtue approach, van Inwagen admits that not just any account of the Trinity counts as a "version" of the doctrine of the Trinity. Furthermore, he admits that whether one's account of the Trinity bears the appropriate relation to the doctrine of the Trinity itself is a question of historical fact. He goes on: "Whether my attempt at apologetic in fact distorts Christian belief is a point on which I humbly (and sensibly) defer to trained theo-logians. In matters of speculative theology—and particularly when the question at issue is whether certain theological speculations are in accord with historical orthodoxy—theologians must sit in judgment over mere philosophers."³⁷

What van Inwagen here calls "theological speculations" are what I have called "accounts." And the bit about philosophers deferring to theologians is essentially the historical approach stated succinctly. So van Inwagen acknowledges, where Tuggy and Forrest do not, that presenting a consistent account of the Trinity is not sufficient to show the doctrine of the Trinity itself to be consistent. He acknowledges that some further premise is necessary, and that is

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Ibid., 83–4.

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to show a certain kind of logical relation between one's account of the Trinity and the doctrine of the Trinity itself.

Last but not least, the fact that he does not go into any substantial discussion of history might lead one to suspect he is only paying lip service to history. But that again would be a mistake. For besides discussing an historical methodological principle in the abstract, he makes substantive use of the principle in evaluating Swinburne's account of the Trinity:

But there is a modern attempt at a demonstrably consistent statement of the doctrine of the Trinity—at least I should be willing to say that its consistency was demonstrable—according to which there are three Gods, and its author's defense of its historical orthodoxy is well thought out and not simply to be dismissed. (I have in mind Professor Swinburne's important essay on the Trinity, "Could There Be More Than One God?") But whether Professor Swinburne's account of the Trinity is, or is consistent with, historical orthodoxy is a subtle question, and one that is not in the end, to be answered by a philosopher.³⁸

Here again, he has the humility to admit that he is only competent to rule on whether Swinburne's account is consistent, but acknowledges that it must also bear the appropriate relation to the doctrine of the Trinity itself. One might try to object that he nowhere attempts to discredit the views of other philosophers on the basis of historical arguments. But as he states, the historical question is "not . . . to be answered by a philosopher," but by "trained theologians." That is, while it is true that van Inwagen says almost nothing substantive about the history of the doctrine of the Trinity, he clearly does not avoid historical questions because he thinks they are *inessential* to the logic of the argument (as Tuggy and Forrest do seem to think), but only because he doesn't claim to be competent in that field and instead defers to those who are. In short, he seems to have the good sense (as the historicist sees things) to at least *assert* his belief that his account is appropriately related to the historical doctrine of the Trinity, showing that he agrees with the historicist that such a premise is required. He simply doesn't attempt to defend that premise, leaving the question to others whom he regards as more competent than himself to determine whether this additional premise is true. Thus, van Inwagen clearly falls outside the virtue-ist camp and seems to side with the historicist. Even if he doesn't want to enter into debate about the relation between his account and the historical doctrine of the Trinity, he, like the historicist, and unlike the virtue-ist, acknowledges that the relation must *be* there.

³⁸Ibid., 88.

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Similar points could be made about Richard Swinburne (probably even more obviously), Richard Cross (more obviously still), and others among the very best analytic theologians, though it would be pointless to prolong the current digression. The point is that since van Inwagen is an analytic theologian if anybody is, it is clear that analytic theology by no means *entails* the virtue approach or its characteristic ahistoricity. The virtue approach is not characteristic of analytic theology generally, but of a highly visible, but misguided (in the point of view of the historicist) *subset* of analytic theology.

However, what this does show about analytic theology in general is *its need for greater engagement with patristic (or other historical) scholarship*. The virtue approach does not necessitate such engagement, but as we have seen, it yields *non sequiturs* or relies on question-begging. On the other hand, while some of the best analytic theologians acknowledge the necessity of additional, historical premises, unless and until those historical premises are supported by actual historical investigations, discussions like van Inwagen's, as valuable as they may turn out to be, remain on the level of promissory notes awaiting verification and vulnerable, until then, to challenges to their historicity.

XIV. Conclusion

One might disagree with my assumptions about how and why virtue approach methodology works for metaphysical puzzles. But without saying how one thinks it *does* work, we are just back to the problem of answering what the logical relation is between a virtue-ist's speculative account of the Trinity and the doctrine of the Trinity itself (specifically, what kind of CTR/VTR there might be going from the speculative account of the phenomenon to the related historical doctrine itself). And without saying more, we seem to have either an invalid argument in defense of the doctrine, or one that begs the question against its opponents.

Furthermore, I strongly suspect that the two general ways of fleshing out the virtue approach discussed above (i.e., one that requires a CTR/VTR, and one that is question-begging) are exhaustive. For the definition of a CTR/VTR is essentially just *any* relation that would make the virtue-ist argument valid. So, suppose the virtue-ist's methodology does not assume, question-beggingly, that the doctrine of the Trinity is consistent/otherwise theoretically virtuous and "work backwards," as it were, from there to his account. And suppose it also does not involve a valid argument "going forward," so to speak, from his account of the Trinity to the doctrine of the Trinity itself through a CTR/VTR. In that case, what could we have here that would somehow essentially involve

(1) an account A of the Trinity, (2) the doctrine of the Trinity itself, and (3) a set of theoretical virtues, in a reasoning process linking them somehow? And

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thus, the big question in all of this is, “Given that the theoretical virtues of accounts are the defining feature of the virtue approach, *what role (if any) could the theoretical virtues of a virtue-ist’s account play in an argument for or against the virtue of the historical doctrine itself?*”

On the other hand, if the virtue-ist is modeling his “defenses” of problematic theological doctrines after Plantinga’s defense against the LPE, then he has failed to understand that the dialectics in these two cases are opposite. Plantinga’s defense serves to allow us to reject certain auxiliary propositions, without rejecting the logical form attributed by his opponent to the propositions in question. The virtue-ists’ “defenses” are supposed to allow us to reject the logical form attributed by their opponents to the propositions in question, in situations in which there are no auxiliary propositions there to reject.

Finally, if the virtue-ist tries to respond to my discussion by denying that we can treat the doctrine of the Trinity as a determinate proposition in the first place, he only makes an even greater mystery out of what he is trying to do.

The considerations I’ve brought against the virtue approach may not constitute a “knock-down” argument. After all, it might in theory be possible for a virtue-ist to specify some CTR/VTR that holds between his proposed account of a theological phenomenon and the historical doctrine in question after all, allowing him to avoid the charge of invalidity. Or again, a virtue-ist might argue that virtue approach methodology, as it operates in the context of metaphysics and other areas of philosophy, in fact works differently than I have assumed, and that the way it in fact works is indeed analogous to how it would work in philosophical theology in such a way as not to be question-begging after all. However, as it stands, unless some virtue-ist can come forward and define a CTR/VTR, or say more about how his methodology works, we would seem to be left with quite a large amount of literature that consists either of *non sequiturs*, question-begging, or arguments the logical structures of which have been left almost entirely mysterious. The next move, then, belongs to the virtue-ist. Unless and until the virtue-ist can answer these questions about his methodology, if we want to determine an answer to the question whether a problematic doctrine is really consistent, we must pursue our inquiry through other means.

Analytic theologians should reject the virtue approach. And we have seen that the ahistoricity and invalidity endemic to the virtue approach is not essential to analytic theology generally, as a reading of van Inwagen shows. But the same features of van Inwagen’s discussion that safeguard its validity also reveal his argument to be in some sense a promissory note in need of historical verification. This will require, at least, deference to patristic and other historical scholarship, and at best, a deep and direct engagement with it. But there is little doubt the dividends of such engagement will far outweigh the effort, both by saving the arguments of analytic theology from logical invalidity and by

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demanding greater clarity in the historical study of Christian thought. Analytic theology and historical theology have both much to gain from, and much to offer to, one another. We may hope to see these two fields develop a more robust conversation in the future.

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