

Weak Relative Identity and the General Partnership Model of the Trinity

by James Goetz

Submitted to *PhilPapers* on April 14, 2011.

This paper briefly proposes a weak relative identity strategy for the doctrine of the Trinity called *the general partnership model*. (For relative identity strategy of the Trinity, see Rea 2003.) This model develops a logically consistent metaphysical constitution for the orthodox Christian doctrines of one divine substance and three divine persons. Moreover, the model rejects the rigid use of absolute identity in Trinitarian doctrine while modeling relative identity with an analogy of general partnerships in the United States.

Philosophical challenge of Trinitarian doctrine includes balancing the following orthodox Christian claims:

1. There is one God.
2. The Father is God; the Son is God; the Holy Spirit is God.
3. The Father is not the Son or the Holy Spirit, and the Son is not the Holy Spirit.

These three claims hold monotheism while excluding tritheism and modalism. However, if these claims also insist upon absolute identity in every circumstance, then any combination of two respective claims logically excludes the remaining claim: 1 and 2 exclude 3; 1 and 3 exclude 2; and 2 and 3 exclude 1.

The primary analogy for this model of relative identity and the Trinity involves the business structure of general partnerships in the United States according to the Uniform Partnership Act of 1914 that was ratified in all states except Louisiana. Here is a list of facts about such general partnerships:

1. A general partnership is a single business entity with manifold partners who are essentially coprincipals.
2. Each coprincipal has one hundred percent of the contractual powers of the partnership.
3. The contractual powers of the partnership never exist apart from the coprincipals.
4. The contractual powers of each coprincipal are not merely exactly similar to each other's but are absolutely identical to each other's.
5. The contractual powers of each coprincipal are also absolutely identical to the contractual powers of the partnership.
6. A partnership is a single entity with powers while each coprincipal has all of those powers.
7. Each coprincipal completely embodies the contractual powers of the partnership.

This model of business partnership helps to analogize orthodox concepts of the Trinity. For example, the ancient church taught that God is one divine substance and three distinct divine persons, while the three persons are the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Also, the one substance may be referred to as *one being* or *one nature*. For this analogy, three partners F, S, and H formed partnership T:

1. T is a single business entity.
2. F has one hundred percent of the contractual powers of T.
3. S has one hundred percent of the contractual powers of T.
4. H has one hundred percent of the contractual powers of T.

5. The contractual powers of F, S, H, and T are absolutely identical.
6. There are no contractual powers of T apart from F, S, and H.
7. F completely embodies T; S completely embodies T; H completely embodies T.
8. Any combination of F, S, and H completely embodies T.

F, S, or H completely embodying T exemplifies relative identity. For example, when customer C wants a contract with T, then C signing a contract with F, S, or H in legal context is absolutely identical to C signing a contract with T. This indicates that F, S, or H and any combination of them is relatively identical to T in the context of business, while F, S, and H each maintain their own distinct personhood.

This model analogizes the contractual powers of T to the one divine substance including the divine powers. In this case, here is a list of facts about the analogy:

1. The Trinity is a single entity or single substance.
2. The Father has all divine substance and powers.
3. The Son has all divine substance and powers.
4. The Holy Spirit has all divine substance and powers.
5. The Trinity has all divine substance and powers.
6. The Father, Son, Holy Spirit, and any combination of them including the Trinity have absolutely identical divine substance and powers.
7. There is no divine substance and powers apart from the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
8. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are copincipals while the Trinity is a single

partnership, coprincipality, or corengency.

9. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are each a distinct person.

This analogy of divine substance and powers helps to support the divine relative identity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit while holding that they are distinct persons although a single substance. The following doctrines stand together in harmony:

1. The Father has all divine substance and powers and is rightly called God.
2. The Son has all divine substance and powers and is rightly called God.
3. The Holy Spirit all divine substance and powers and is rightly called God.
4. Any combination of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit has all divine nature and powers and is rightly called God.
5. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are distinct persons although one divine substance and likewise one God.

The harmony of the last five statements is possible while assuming context for relative identity. For example, each of the persons has all of the divine nature and powers and is rightly called God while there is only one God. On the contrary, if each of the persons had their own portion of unshared divine nature and powers, then they would be three gods.

This model includes caveats. For example, the Trinity is unique. In response to this problem, the model uses a primary analogy that outlines the metaphysical constitution of the Trinity, while analogies by definition involve identifying resemblances in unlike things. Given that definition, nobody should feel surprised that analogies are imperfect.

Caveats of the general partnership model include the following:

1. All general partnerships have a beginning in time and face dissolution while the self-existent and essentially indivisible Trinity has always existed and will always exist.
2. All general partnerships form by separate physical persons who unite to form a partnership that is a nonphysical organization while the Trinity has always been a united substance.
3. Each general partner has all of the contractual powers of the partnership, but each partner in the context of a proposed internal constitutional amendment has only one vote while majority rules.
4. General partners typically have a private life apart from the partnership business while the persons of the Trinity never have life apart from being God.
5. General partners might see with a disunited point of view while the partners in the Trinity always sees with a united point of view.
6. Civil laws that make business entities such as general partnerships are powerful forces in the minds of humans, but those laws are a nonphysical contract while God is an essentially dimensionless physical substance.
7. Contract law is an impersonal force governed by persons while God is entirely personal.

These caveats exemplify that the Trinity is unique. But the general partnership model nonetheless harmoniously exemplifies the oneness and threeness of the Trinity according to orthodox Christian doctrine.

The concept of divine personhood or selfhood faces challenge for any orthodox Christian model of the Trinity. For example, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are the exact same type of

person while the tripersonal Trinity is not the exact same type of person as the Father, Son or Holy Spirit. In one context, the Trinity is a person with three centers of personhood. Regardless of the awkwardness, this requires two distinct but related contexts of the words *person* and *self*: (1) unipersonal and (2) tripersonal.

The concept of personhood for each of the three divine persons also faces challenge. For example, most human persons have their own three-dimensional body to themselves, which is their individual three-dimensional substance. But the three divine persons indivisibly share the same substance, which is unlike any human person.

Extraordinary exceptions to one human person per three-dimensional body include various cases of conjoined twins with one rib cage such as the wonderful Abigail and Brittany Hensel (Weathers 2006). Conjoined twins are identical twins who never completely separated in the amniotic sac, while some conjoined twins share bodily organs. In the case of Abigail and Brittany, they have a dicephalic body with two normal arms and two normal legs. Each twin has her own duplicated central nervous system, spine, esophagus, set of lungs, heart, gall bladder, and stomach, while they partially share a peripheral nervous system and share a conjoined circulatory system, one rib cage, one liver, one large intestine, one small intestine, one pelvis, one urinary bladder, and one set of reproductive organs. Abigail's head is nearest to the right shoulder while Brittany's head is nearest to the left shoulder. Abigail controls the right limbs while Brittany controls the left limbs. Abigail feels only the left limbs while Brittany feels only the right limbs. Regardless that each controls and feels only the limbs on their own side, they astonish doctors while instinctively coordinating as one person. They manage emails with two-handed typing, play two-handed piano, and enjoy sports such as bowling, volleyball, cycling, softball, and swimming. On their sixteenth birthday, they passed their driver's tests. When they

drove, they each had a hand on the steering wheel as Brittany controlled the blinkers and the lights while Abigail controlled the pedals and stick shift. They often understand each other's thoughts and desires without speaking to each other. However, they developed different academic strengths. They simultaneously and separately hand write during school examines while earning different grades. They are a physical and metaphysical wonder who push the boundaries of individual personhood and a shared three-dimensional body. Their bodily partnership helps to analogize the manifold divine persons sharing a single substance, regardless of the obvious caveats.

The structure of general partnerships and other organizations challenge a rigid application of absolute identity in all circumstances. In one context, each partner completely embodies the contractual powers of the partnership. If somebody needs to negotiate with partnership T, then negotiating with partner F, S, or H is relatively identical to negotiating with T. In this context, the respective partner assumes the relative identity of T. However, in another context, F, S, and H also have their own private lives, but those private lives are completely liable for debts incurred by T. Additionally, a scandalous private life of a partner may harm the partnership.

An example similar to humans identified as their organization includes the President of the United States. The President is vested with all presidential powers. All United States presidents during their tenure embody all presidential powers while they are identified as the President. However, all presidents also keep their own private identity. Examples comparable to the President include cases of monarchs and coregents.

Organizations such as business entities and political entities are metaphysically interesting because they are nonphysical entities with cases of astonishing power. They also ironically may own physical property. Regardless of the nonphysical constitution and other

caveats, entities such as general partnerships and corengencies help to analogize the orthodox Christian doctrines of one divine substance and manifold divine persons.

References

Rea, Michael C. 2003. "Relative Identity and the Doctrine of the Trinity." *Philosophia Christi* 5(2): 431–45.

Weathers, Helen. 2006. "Abigail and Brittany Hensel: An Extraordinary Bond." *Mail Online*, December 31. Accessed April 7, 2011. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-425736/Abigail-Brittany-Hensel-extraordinary-bond.html>.

Acknowledgments

I thank Dale Tuggy for important criticism of the model's primary analogy.

Copyright © 2011 James Edward Goetz