

## A Possible Model of the Trinity

We left off our discussion of the Trinity last time by saying that the biblical doctrine of the Trinity is a logically coherent doctrine when properly understood. But that still leaves us with the question: how can three distinct persons be one being? How can you have three divine persons who are together one being?

Maybe we can get a start at this question by means of an analogy. I want to caution that there is no reason to think that there has to be an analogy to the doctrine of the Trinity among created things. But I think that analogies can be helpful as a springboard, so to speak, for philosophical reflection and for accurate formulation. So consider this analogy. In Greco-Roman mythology one of the labors of Hercules was to subdue the ferocious three-headed dog named Cerberus who guarded the gates of Hades. We can suppose that Cerberus, having three heads, must have had three brains and therefore three distinct states of consciousness. Each one would be whatever it is like to be a dog. Therefore Cerberus, although he is a sentient being, doesn't have a unified consciousness. Rather he has three consciousnesses. Even though he's one being, he has three consciousnesses. We could even give proper names to each of these consciousnesses. For example, rather whimsically, we can refer to them as Rover, Bowser, and Spike. These three centers of consciousness are entirely discrete, and, when you think about it, they might even come into conflict with one another. Still, in order for Cerberus to be viable as a biological organism, not to speak of being able to function effectively as a guard dog, there has to be a considerable degree of cooperation among these three consciousnesses Rover, Bowser, and Spike.

Despite the diversity of his three mental states, Cerberus is clearly, I think, one dog. He is a single biological organism exemplifying a canine nature of some sort. Rover, Bowser, and Spike may also be said to be canine even though they're not three dogs. They are parts or aspects of the one three-headed dog Cerberus. So if Hercules were attempting to enter into Hades and Spike snarled at him or bit him on the leg Hercules might well say *Cerberus snarled at me* or *Cerberus attacked me*.

Now I have to confess that the church fathers would have resisted analogies like Cerberus. But I think that once you give up the doctrine of divine simplicity (that God has no distinctions within his being), then Cerberus, I think, does seem to be what St. Augustine called an “image” of the Trinity among creatures. These are not exact analogies, but they are sort of a shadowy image among creatures of what the Trinity is. You have here one biological organism – one dog – which has three centers of consciousness.

We can enhance the Cerberus story by imagining that Cerberus is rational and has self-consciousness. In that case Rover, Bowser, and Spike are plausibly personal agents. They are self-conscious, personal agents. Cerberus would therefore be a tri-personal being. If we were asked what makes Cerberus a single being despite his three minds, I think we'd doubtlessly reply that it's because he has a single physical body. It's because he is a single biological organism that we would say Cerberus is one thing even though he is tri-personal. But think about this. Suppose Cerberus were to be killed, and his minds survive the death of his body. Suppose they're immortal and live beyond the death of his body. In what sense

would they then still be one being? How would those three persons differ intrinsically from three exactly similar minds which have always been unembodied? Do you see the question? If he is one being because he is embodied in this canine organism, if the three minds survive the death of the body, how would they be any different than three minds that have just always existed unembodied? What would make them one being as opposed to three separate beings? And in the case of the Trinity, since the divine persons are (at least prior to the incarnation) unembodied, then we can ask, why do we have here one being rather than three individual beings?

This is a difficult question, but maybe we can get some insight on it by reflecting on the nature of the soul. Souls are immaterial substances, and some philosophers think that animals have souls as well as human beings. On this view souls come in a wide spectrum of varying capacities. For example, higher animals like chimpanzees and dolphins have souls that are more richly endowed than the souls of lower animals like turtles and iguanas. What makes the human soul a person is the fact that the human soul is equipped with rational faculties of intellect and volition which enable it to be a self-reflective agent capable of self-determination. Animals don't have souls that are so richly endowed as to be self-reflective agents capable of self-determination.

When you think about it God is very much like an unembodied soul. In fact, as a mental substance God just seems to be a soul of some sort. We normally would equate a rational soul with a person, but that's because the human souls that we are acquainted with are persons. In our experience all of the rational souls that

we're familiar with are individual persons. But the reason that human souls are individual persons is because each soul is equipped with one set of rational faculties sufficient for being a person. Suppose then that God is a soul which is endowed with three complete sets of rational faculties, each set of which is sufficient for personhood. In that case God, though one soul, would not be one person, but rather he would be three persons. For God would have three centers of self-consciousness, intentionality, and volition. God would clearly not be three discrete souls, since these cognitive faculties are all faculties of just one soul. So God would be one soul which is tri-personal in nature. Just as our individual souls support one person because they are equipped with one set of rational faculties sufficient for personhood, we can think of God as a soul which is equipped with three sets of rational faculties, each sufficient for personhood. This sort of model would seem to give a clear sense to the classical formula *three persons in one substance*.

So that's the model of the Trinity that I want to propose as a possibility.