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FROM INSEPARABLE OPERATIONS TO THE UNITY OF GOD:
ANALYTIC READINGS OF GREGORY OF NYSSA'S
TRINITARIAN ARGUMENTATION*

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary analytic philosophy, there is an ongoing discussion about the Holy Trinity. The main question is this: how can the Christian doctrine of the Trinity be consistent? It appears to be contradictory, for in the doctrine one can find a set of sentences that seem to entail a contradiction. Christians claim that the Father is God, the Son is God and the Holy Spirit is God, that the Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Holy Spirit and the Father is not the Holy Spirit, and yet that there is one God.¹ So how should one think about the Trinity to avoid contradiction? Is this even possible?

Over the past fifty years numerous solutions to this problem have been proposed,² and the debate has become so lively that this period is sometimes referred to as “the new fourth century”. Analytic philosophy is often criticised for being ahistorical, and indeed, many authors have constructed the proposed logic or ontology of the Trinity in isolation from the historical sources of the doctrine, treating the problem of the Trinity as yet another philosophical puzzle to be solved. Many authors built their accounts of the Trinity by interpreting

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*This article is dedicated to Professor Jan Kielbasa. The university courses he taught were a wonderful opportunity for me to explore the thought of Gregory of Nyssa, for which I am deeply grateful.

¹ This classical formulation of the problem in terms of seven sentences that seem to entail a contradiction comes from CARTWRIGHT (1987).

² An overview of positions can be found e.g. in MCCALL (2010, 11–55) and TUGGY (2024).

the aforementioned problematic sentences from the doctrine quite arbitrarily, appealing mainly to their own intuitions and arguing in favour of their positions based on selected theoretical virtues, such as simplicity or not entailing problematic ontological commitments.

As convincingly argued by Jedwab and Keller (2019) and Branson (2018), such a methodology fails to solve the Trinity problem. For the main difficulty lies not in reformulating the problematic sentences so that they do not entail contradictions, but in showing that the proposed paraphrases preserve what was said: that they clarify rather than revise the contents of the original sentences. This content was established in the fourth century by the Church Fathers, who formulated the doctrine and defended it against objections. So, for a given account of the Trinity to be considered a solution to the problem, it must be argued that theologians considered orthodox would accept this account as an admissible interpretation of the doctrine of the Trinity.

My aim in this article is to examine one of Gregory of Nyssa's Trinitarian arguments, aiming to formulate a solution to the problem of the Trinity that meets this methodological requirement. Among the fourth-century theologians dealing with the Trinity problem, Gregory stands out both for his unquestioned authority and reputation as an orthodox scholar, as well as for formulating an original and promising argument concerning the Trinity. In *Ad Ablabium* Gregory argues for the unity of God starting from the shared actions of the divine Persons. Gregory argues that "God" is an agent noun, much like "shoemaker" or "orator". While humans, even when practicing the same profession, act separately—leading us to speak of multiple shoemakers or orators—the divine persons share all their actions *ad extra* (towards the created world) and are therefore one God. In contemporary analytic debate, this argument has already been analysed by Branson (2014) and Hasker (2013). Branson considers the argument valid, while Hasker criticizes it. In this article, I first present my reconstruction of Gregory's argument. I then analyse how the premises of the argument are understood by Branson and Hasker. I show that both, for the argument to work, require a very strong unity of action of the Persons, with Branson arguing that it occurs and Hasker arguing that it does not. I propose a weakening of this requirement and contend that Gregory's argument can work even with a weaker understanding of the unity of action of the Persons. Finally, I sketch a solution to the Trinity problem based on my interpretation of Gregory's argument.

2. THE UNITY OF ACTION ARGUMENT

Gregory of Nyssa presented many arguments aimed at showing how the three Persons of the Trinity can be one God. In his most famous work on this subject, the *Ad Ablabium*, one finds several different arguments towards this conclusion.³ I intend to focus on the argument from unity of action. I do so for two reasons. First, as Branson (2014, 134–39) persuasively argues, this is the argument that Gregory himself really believed, whereas the others were given for rhetorical reasons or, somewhat hypothetically, starting from premises that he himself did not share.⁴ Secondly, this argument simply seems the most promising.

Gregory aims to answer Ablabius' question: why is it that of Peter, James, and John, who are all of human nature, we may say that they are three men, but of the Father, Son, and Spirit, who are all of divine nature, it is forbidden to say that they are three Gods (GREGORY OF NYSSA 1958 [in *Gregorii Nysseni Opera*, vol. 3/1; henceforth: *GNO* 3/1], 38.7–18; 1976 [= *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Second Series*, vol. 5; henceforth *NPNF* 5], 331)? Posing the problem in this way presupposes a difference of Persons, whereas the unity of God is treated as a thesis to be proved.⁵ Although Gregory explains in the last part of the text that we distinguish Persons by their relations of origin, this is not central to answering the initial problem. For this reason, I will simply assume the distinction of Persons without here settling what it is based on. I only propose to make the minimalist assumption that Persons are not strictly identical with one another.⁶

³ Analyses of Gregory's argumentation contained in *Ad Ablabium* with regard to the history of philosophy can be found in AYRES (2004), MASPERO (2007), ANATOLIOS (2011), KARFÍKOVÁ (2011), RADDE-GALLWITZ (2018), among others. Branson (2014) offers a detailed analysis focused on logic, while Marmodoro (2018) refers to a broader metaphysical context.

⁴ Ayres (2004, 349), too, claims about the argument from the unity of action that it is "the argument Gregory thinks conclusive and which we should treat as fundamental in his Trinitarian theology."

⁵ This may be reminiscent of the "starting from the three" characteristic of contemporary social trinitarianism (ST). As Leftow (2010, 441) proposed to define this family of positions, "ST is an explanatory project: ST takes the three Persons as in some way basic and explains how they constitute or give rise to one God." It is important to remember, however, that in Gregory this primacy is to be understood as standing for an assumption in the explanatory order and that Gregory does not aim to show how Persons "constitute" or "give rise to" one God, but rather why they count as one God. Interpreting Gregory as "starting" from the three is criticised by Coakley (1999), but her arguments do not seem convincing. Coakley rightly points out that Gregory places great emphasis on the unity of the Persons. What she fails to note, however, is that the emphasis on unity stems precisely from the fact that it is the unity of God that is the thesis to be proved in Gregory.

⁶ When I write of strict identity, I mean a relation subject to the law of indiscernibility of identicals. So, assuming that Persons are not strictly identical, I say that they differ in pairs by at least one property.

The first premise of the argument from the unity of action is that the word “God” is an agent noun. Gregory argues that “the term ‘Godhead’ is significant of operation [energeia], and not of nature” (*GNO* 3/1, 46.17; *NPNF* 5, 333) and compares the word “God” to such agent nouns as “orator”, “surveyor”, or “farmer”. He justifies this thesis in two ways. Firstly, he argues, divine nature is completely unknowable and thus does not even have a name. The second argument is etymological. Gregory believes that the word “God” comes from beholding or seeing everything (especially the thoughts of a man), and thus means more or less the same as “observer” (*GNO* 3/1, 42.19–44.22; *NPNF* 5, 332–33). Just as we call the Creator the one who creates, the Judge the one who judges, and the Saviour the one who saves, so we call God the one who “gods”. Gregory’s arguments may not seem entirely convincing, but it is worth noting that he is not alone in maintaining such a thesis about the meaning of the word “God”. Similar claims can be found in Plutarch, Irenaeus, Eusebius of Caesarea (RADDEGALLWITZ 2018, 208), Justin Martyr, Theophilus of Antioch, Origen or Ambrose of Milan, among others (see the quotations from these authors cited in BRADSHAW 2004, 162–63, and BRANSON 2014, 146–48). Branson (2014, 115ff.) argues:

As a rough generalization (that has a number of exceptions), “Western” fathers tended to say only that “God” either signifies the divine nature or an *energeia* (Lat. *operatio*), whereas “Eastern” fathers tended to come down decisively on the side of “God” signifying an *energeia* and not the divine nature or *ousia*.⁷

The claim about the meaning of the word “God” is important for the problem of the Trinity insofar as it indicates what we should count when we want to determine how many Gods there are. We should be counting agents, performers of divine actions (rather than, for example, individuals possessing divine nature). What actions are proper to God is not essential here—it could be Gregory’s “seeing the thoughts of a man”, but it could also be something else, such as creating, sanctifying, vivifying, etc. The key point is that to count how many Gods there are, we should use the same criterion as for counting agents.

Since God is supposed to be an agent, and thus subject to the criteria of identity for agents, one has to ask what these criteria are. Gregory proposes to count according to shared actions. He argues that “the name derived from operation [energeia] cannot be divided among many where the result of their mutual operation is one” (*GNO* 3/1, 50.10–12; *NPNF* 5, 334).

⁷ The thesis that ‘God’ signifies nature is defended by, among others, Thomas Aquinas. In *ST* I, q. 13, a. 8 he briefly discusses and rejects the aforementioned arguments: from the unknowability of nature and from etymology, but does not explicitly refer to Gregory of Nyssa.

So, if *x* and *y* share an action that produces one effect, *x* and *y* are the same (one) agent. The proposed identity criterion for agents is thus not identical or reducible to identity criteria for individuals or persons. It refers to the independent condition of sharing action. Since God is supposed to be a type of agent, for divine Persons the criterion will be: if *x* and *y* share an action (of the divine type), *x* and *y* are the same God.

Central to the argument is the preservation of the difference between the divine and human cases: we want to say that three Persons are one God, but in most cases we do not want to say that, for example, two people are one painter, president, or singer. For examples from the human world, the proposed criterion for the identity of agents should mostly yield the number of agents equal to the number of acting persons. In the further analysis of Gregory's argument, it is precisely this—determining how strong unity of action should be required for agent identity to preserve the required difference between the divine and human cases—that will be the main problem.

To reach the conclusion, a further premise is needed that the Divine Persons do indeed act jointly. In Christian theology, this is the classic thesis concerning the Trinity, often expressed by the maxim “*opera trinitatis ad extra sunt indivisa*”, meaning that the Trinity's “external” operations (in relation to the created world) are indivisible. This thesis is accepted by both Eastern and Western Christian theologians (CARY 1992).⁸ It is considered one of the main elements of the pro-Nicene consensus (AYRES 2004, 296–300) and one of the main Trinitarian theses in general (e.g. Catechism of the Catholic Church, § 258). It was adopted at the Councils of Constantinople (681) and Toledo (638, 675, 693) (VIDU 2021, 82ff.). Gregory also accepts it:

In the case of the Divine nature we do not similarly learn that the Father does anything by Himself in which the Son does not work conjointly, or again that the Son has any special operation apart from the Holy Spirit; but every operation which extends from God to the Creation, and is named according to our variable conceptions of it, has its origin from the Father, and proceeds through the Son, and is perfected in the Holy Spirit. (*GNO* 3/1, 47.21–48.2; *NPNF* 5, 334)

Gregory argues for the unity of the action of the Persons by relying on quotations from the Bible (e.g. Isa 4:4, Matt 12:28; *GNO* 3/1, 50.4–12; *NPNF* 5, 334). It is worth noting here that in Christian theology, the main and fundamental source

⁸ Criticism and suggestions for major changes to or rejection of this doctrine only appear in contemporary theology (VIDU 2021, 82–89).

of the thesis of the unity of the action of the Persons—independent of all metaphysical speculation and reasoning—is the Bible (VIDU 2021, xiv). As I have mentioned, the thesis of the shared action of the Persons is quite widely accepted by Christian theologians, so it seems reasonable to treat it as part of the doctrine. However, an important question arises: how should we understand this unity of action? Do the Persons have all the same actions, or is there rather some kind of close cooperation between them? We have been moving all along towards the conclusion that the three Persons are one God so that the actual unity of action between them must be strong enough to satisfy the identity criterion for the agents given earlier. Therefore, the second problem in analysing the argument will be to ask how Christian theologians understood the unity of action of the Persons, and in particular how Gregory of Nyssa understood it in the context of the proposed argument.

With the criterion of the identity of the agents adopted above, coupled with the thesis of the real unity of action of the Persons, Gregory can move to a conclusion:

For this reason the name derived from the operation is not divided with regard to the number of those who fulfil it, because the action of each concerning anything is not separate and peculiar, but whatever comes to pass, in reference either to the acts of His providence for us, or to the government and constitution of the universe, comes to pass by the action [gr] of the Three, yet what does come to pass is not three things. (*GNO* 3/1, 48.2–8; *NPNF* 5, 334)

I propose to reconstruct the whole argument as follows:

- (1) To be a God is to be an agent who performs some special kind of actions.
- (2) To determine the number of Gods it is necessary to apply an identity criterion appropriate to agents. (corollary from (1))
- (3) If individuals x and y have inseparable operations, then x and y are one (the same) agent.
- (4) The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit have inseparable operations.
- (5) The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are one God. (conclusion)

The main difficulty lies in clarifying premises (3) and (4), with premise (3) being the most interesting from a philosophical point of view, i.e. the identity criterion for agents. Before discussing possible interpretations of these premises I would like to make two remarks about the argument.

First, this argument was often confused with another Trinitarian argument proposed by Gregory, also referring to the unity of the actions of the Divine

Persons. Gregory repeatedly argued⁹ that if the Father, the Son, and the Spirit perform actions of the same type, they are of the same nature. This reasoning, though it may appear similar to the one discussed above, is different from it and aims at a different conclusion. For it refers to types, not to tokens of actions. Gregory argues that the Spirit is of a divine nature because He sees people's thoughts, and so the Spirit performs an action that only someone of a divine nature can perform. This reasoning is analogous to inferring from the premise that Cicero laughs that Cicero is a man. Meanwhile, the argument from the unity of action, discussed above, is analogous to the reasoning that if Cicero fashioned the speech "In Catilinam" and Tullius fashioned the speech "In Catilinam", too, Cicero and Tullius would be one and the same orator. These two arguments—from the unity of tokens of action to the unity of God and from the unity of types of action to the unity of type of nature—were sometimes confused, and hence the argument from the unity of action was sometimes treated not as a separate, independent argument, but only as a reinforcement of the argument appearing at the beginning of *Ad Ablabium* starting from the unity of divine nature.¹⁰

Second, it should be noted that, according to Gregory, God is not supposed to be some additional fourth agent in addition to the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. In the contemporary debate on shared agency, the question arises whether a group (e.g. a company, a nation) can be considered an agent over and above the agents that comprise the group (see e.g. HESS 2014). Gregory's argument, however, does not appear analogous. God-type agents are supposed to be one, not four. Gregory does not want to argue that there are more agents than persons. On the contrary, he wants to argue that there are fewer of them.

3. BRANSON AND HASKER ON GREGORY'S ARGUMENT

In analytical Trinitarian discussions, the problem of interpreting the thesis of the shared action of the Persons has arisen independently of the problem of analysing the argument from unity of action. De facto, in the case of any account of the Trinity, one can ask how, on its grounds, the action of the Persons is to

⁹ For example, in *Ad Eustachium*, in the Third Homily on the Our Father, and even in *Ad Ablabium*, immediately before the argument from unity of action discussed above (*GNO* 3/1, 44.21–46.2; *NPNF* 5, 333).

¹⁰ For example, Ayres maintains that, in writing about the unity of action, Gregory "uses this ontological reflection as a further way of vindicating the uniqueness and ineffability of the divine nature" (AYRES 2004, 358).

be understood.¹¹ One of the first scholars to address this issue was Richard Swinburne (1994, 171–75). He was interested in the problem of how three individuals could be omnipotent and not impose limits on each other’s omnipotence. He proposed a solution in which the Persons “agree” on the spheres of their action. Criticising this solution, Brian Leftow (2009, 79) distinguished four more possible ways of understanding the cooperation of the Persons. It may be that, for a given action “one Person makes the largest contribution, with the others merely supporting or cooperating” or that “all three Persons contribute partly but equally”. Another option distinguished by Leftow is overdetermination: “The Three overdetermine the divine action, each of them contributing enough on his own to fully account for the divine effect” (79). Finally, it may be that

the three Persons together just are one agent, in the sense they make not three distinct contributions, however related, but just one contribution among them. So to say: the Father acts, the Son acts, and the Spirit acts, and yet there are not in any sense three acts, but one act. Any act-token which is the Father’s is equally and fully the Son’s and Spirit’s, without overdetermination, partial contribution, etc. (79)

I propose to encapsulate these distinctions in two categories proposed by Vidu: soft indivisibility, consisting in “the divine persons participate in shared and collective actions together”, and hard indivisibility, “meaning that every act token of any Trinitarian person is also an act token of the other persons” (VIDU 2021, xv). Examples of soft indivisibility would be Swinburne’s proposed sharing of spheres of action, and the first three options distinguished by Leftow: unequal contributions, equal contributions, and overdetermination. Leftow’s last option, on the other hand, is identical to hard indivisibility. Let us ask this: when Gregory of Nyssa wrote about the unity of action of the Persons, did he interpret it in any of the above ways? Or was his understanding still different?

As I mentioned, the question of interpreting the thesis of the unity of action of the Persons has been considered independently of the argument from the unity of action. Let us note, however, that the use of shared actions as a premise of the argument places additional constraints on the interpretation of this unity. It is not enough for the shared action to satisfy the requirements of the discussion above, but also the interpretation of the unity of action must be strong enough

¹¹ The problem of understanding shared action originally emerged in the analytic discussion as an objection to social accounts of the Trinity (LEFTOW 2009, 78–80), which are characterised by considering Persons as individuals with separate self-consciousnesses, wills, and action. However, as Williams (2017, 322) has pointed out, the problem of explaining joint action applies equally to Leftow’s Latin view, since on its grounds Persons also have separate consciousnesses and wills, and so in principle can disagree and take different decisions and actions.

for the Persons to be called a single agent. In particular, the question arises whether the argument requires the adoption of hard indivisibility or whether some version of soft indivisibility also allows concluding that the Persons are one agent.

In addition to the question of the nature of the cooperation of the Persons, more questions need to be asked to refine this thesis. First, in order to reach the conclusion of the unity of God, is it necessary to take into account all the actions of the Persons or only a subset of them, e.g. actions of a certain type? Secondly, should the Persons be required to cooperate out of necessity, and if so, what kind of necessity should this be, and what should it arise from? Let us now see how Gregory's position has been interpreted, and what answer these interpretations give to the questions posed above. Let us start with Branson's interpretation.

According to Branson, Gregory's proposed understanding of cooperation of the Persons can be illustrated by conducting a thought experiment: suppose there are three people who do not differ in any properties except that they are in certain asymmetrical relations to each other (which ensures that there are three of them). They are painting walls. While they do, they make every movement with the roller in unison because they do not differ in their position in space. There is nothing to distinguish the paint roller strokes made by one from the roller strokes of the second and the third. Thus, if we assume that actions are subject to the principle of identity of indiscernibles, we can conclude that the three persons have only one shared action (more precisely, that each of their actions is shared). How many painters are we dealing with in this story? Branson argues that, at the very least, it would be misleading and (based on Gregory's theory) simply false to conclude that with three. Since each stroke of the roller is shared by three people, they are one painter (BRANSON 2014, 191–93).

Let us tell the same story in the language of ontology. Branson argues that actions (*energeiai*) are events. They are something particular, that is, not repeatable (unlike universals) (BRANSON 2014, 178–84). The criteria for the identity of actions do not include being performed by a specific person. A given action (e.g. painting of the *Pastoral Concert*) could remain the same if performed by someone else (e.g. in one possible world by Titian and in another by Giorgione). For this reason, it is permissible for one action (even within the same world) to belong to more than one person (Branson argues that Gregory's theory of actions, interpreted in this way, should be regarded as a position similar to Davidson's contemporary conception of events, although even more coarse-grained; see BRANSON 2022, 145–46). This ontological theory of action allows one to accept that “the hypostases of the Trinity synergize on every token *energeia* they perform”

(BRANSON 2014, 183). In other words, every particular action of one of the Persons of the Trinity is at the same time an action of the others. For there is nothing to distinguish their actions. For example, the creation of the world by the Father is no different from the creation of the world by the Son (apart from the person performing the action, who, however, does not affect its identity), so we are dealing with one creation. Given this, it must be concluded that of the possibilities proposed by Leftow for understanding the cooperation of the Persons, Branson would have chosen the strongest one—the strict identity of all actions.

The Persons share all activities, but are all of them relevant for talking of one God? Branson argues that they are not. Gregory does not attribute any more importance to the word “God” than he does to other terms such as “Creator” or “Judge” (BRANSON 2014, 237ff.; see also (*GNO* 3/1, 48.9–52.12; *NPNF* 5, 334–35) where Gregory carries out analogous arguments aiming at the conclusion that there is one Life-giver, one Judge, and one Saviour). To determine how many Creators there are (one), consider the number of “creating” actions; to determine how many Judges there are—the number of “judging” actions, and to determine how many Gods there are, the number of actions somewhat artificially referred to in English as “godding”. To simplify the analysis, Branson chooses to abstract from the relationship of the Trinity to the world, and so to analyse the “prior to creation” situation (BRANSON 2014, 211). In such a situation, there is nothing to distinguish the actions of the Persons. Using the principle of the identity of the indiscernibles, Branson concludes that there is only one Divine action and that it belongs equally to all Persons. Ultimately, Branson concludes that “there is one God because there is only one token power and there is only one token action (*energeia*) shared among the Triad” (2014, 184). Persons are the same God because they are in a relationship of being “single-tokened with respect to godding” (248).

As can be seen from the above summary of Branson’s theses, in his interpretation the unity of action is very strongly understood as the strict identity of all actions, only godding-type actions are taken into account for the counting of Gods and the unity of action follows from the principles of individuation of actions and is therefore metaphysically necessary.

Some objections can be raised against this interpretation. First of all, it seems wrong to abstract from the created world. As I mentioned in the previous section, the thesis concerning the shared action of the Persons speaks of actions *ad extra*, that is, “towards the outside”, in relation to the created world. It is difficult to see how the “godding” of which Branson writes could count as action towards the world in a “prior to creation” situation. Action cannot be “*ad extra*” when there

is no “extra”, no “outside”. If, on the other hand, “goddling” is, as Gregory wants, seeing human thoughts, it necessarily cannot occur in a situation where there are no people. It would seem, then, that rather than recognising that being “single-tokened with respect to godding” makes the Persons one God, it is better to accept that this is guaranteed by the fact that the Persons have every token action of “goddling” in common.¹²

Second, it seems questionable to use the principle of identity of indiscernibles in the argument. This principle was originally applied to individuals, but since Black’s famous critique (1952) it has come to be regarded as controversial and not universally valid.¹³ In order to apply it to the problem discussed here, it would have to be shown that this principle applies to actions. Meanwhile, it is easy to carry out a Black-style thought experiment undermining this thesis: suppose that God simultaneously creates two spheres in an empty world that are identical in all properties. The creation of one sphere and the creation of the other sphere do not differ in any property, yet they appear to be two distinct actions. So it turns out that for counting actions we should not use the principle of identity of indiscernibles. Moreover, also the attribution of a given action to all Persons based on this principle seems questionable. For it is conceivable that in an empty world, one of the divine Persons creates a sphere, while the others do not act.¹⁴ Thus, it does not appear that the proposed metaphysics of action is correct and thereby that the metaphysics of action itself guarantees the necessary cooperation of the Persons.

Let us try to modify Branson’s position and assume that Persons are one God because they have all actions strictly identical (and not because of one special action that is shared). This interpretation has several advantages. First of all, the postulated unity of action indeed seems strong enough to speak of the Persons as one agent. They perform the same causal role in relation to the world. Indeed, the identity of the causal role appears to be a reasonable criterion of identity, postulated by philosophers independently of the problem under discussion,¹⁵ and thus not ad hoc. Second, the adoption of such a strong criterion

¹² It appears that this type of modified interpretation of Gregory’s position is presented by Branson in a later article: “The three hypostases of the Trinity count as a single god, a single savior, redeemer, etc., because all such token actions are literally identical” (BRANSON 2022, 144).

¹³ Gregory of Nyssa himself sometimes applied the principle of the identity of indiscernibles in argumentation, but writing about the identity of natures rather than hypostases (e.g. *GNO* 1, 155.13–15).

¹⁴ Unless, of course, we accept some additional restriction that would force the Persons to cooperate, such as having the same numerical set of powers that they cannot use separately.

¹⁵ Mumford (2003, 162), for example, adopts this type of identity criterion for dispositions.

introduces a desirable difference between the divine and the human case. There are no such cases of maximally strong shared action in the created world. For this reason, the proposed identity criterion for agents will not introduce changes in the counting results of rhetors, potters, or shoemakers.

Even after modifying Branson's proposal, however, doubt arises as to whether he correctly interpreted Gregory of Nyssa's position. Did Gregory really assume a strict identity of actions between the Persons of the Trinity? Do the Persons of the Trinity fulfil such a strongly understood requirement of unity of action and are they one agent? Hasker argues that Gregory should not be credited with such a thesis. He justifies this by citing the example of the interaction of the Persons given by Gregory:

For as when we learn concerning the God of the universe, from the words of Scripture, that He judges all the earth, we say that He is the Judge of all things through the Son: and again, when we hear that the Father judgeth no man, we do not think that the Scripture is at variance with itself,—(for He Who judges all the earth does this by His Son to Whom He has committed all judgment; and everything which is done by the Only-begotten has its reference to the Father, so that He Himself is at once the Judge of all things and judges no man, by reason of His having, as we said, committed all judgment to the Son...). (*GNO* 3/1, 49.8–16; *NPNF* 5, 334)

William Hasker comments on this passage as follows:

Here we see that the Father “judges all the earth” precisely by *delegating* the office and authority of judgment to the Son. One thinks of monarchical systems in which judgment is pronounced in the name of the monarch, but where the king or queen does not personally participate in the activity of reaching and announcing the verdict. Here there can be no doubt that the Son is said to perform an action, judging, that is *not* in the same way an action of the Father or the Spirit, though it is done in a way that accords with their will and intention. (HASKER 2013, 29)

Hasker concludes that, in the light of this example, Gregory cannot be interpreted as claiming that the Persons have all actions the same. Rather, the action of the Persons seems to resemble the cooperation of human persons in the created world. However, if this is the correct interpretation, it does not seem right to regard the Persons as a single agent. For we can think of examples of cooperation from the world of humans in which we would not say that we are dealing with a single agent: “Think of three attorneys working together on a particular case—or an even simpler example, three singers maintaining a perfect unison throughout a lengthy piece of music. In these sorts of situations, it is beyond doubt that we will still speak in the plural, of ‘attorneys’, or ‘singers’” (HASKER 2013, 28–29).

Hasker claims that “in order for Gregory’s argument to succeed the trinitarian Persons must work, not only inseparably, but *indistinguishably*, so that in each and every instance there is only a single agency involved” (HASKER 2013, 29; italics in the original). Yet, in the example of the delegation of judgment, the understanding of shared action seems weaker, so that the conclusion the three Persons are one agent cannot be drawn.

Hasker’s position can be summarised as follows: the unity of action of the Persons is taken in the soft version, as the absence of conflict between the actions of the Persons, the congruence of their goals and intentions. This soft version does not allow the Persons to be considered as a single agent. All the actions of the Persons are shared in this weaker way. Hasker also argues that, on the grounds of his account of the Trinity, unity of action is necessary. However, this does not follow from the metaphysics of the Trinity, but from the perfect goodness and omniscience of the Persons (HASKER 2013, 208).

It might seem that if Hasker is right, Gregory’s argument breaks down. The unity of action of the Persons is not strong enough to make them one agent, and thus one God. Let us see if there is any way out to save Gregory’s argument.

4. SAVING THE ARGUMENT AND SOLVING THE TRINITY PROBLEM

Given the construction of Gregory’s argument, to save it from criticism, two options are available. One can

- (1) require a strong degree of cooperation between the Persons (hard indivisibility) and hold that it actually occurs between them;
- (2) weaken this requirement and argue that with a looser degree of cooperation (soft indivisibility) the Persons will still be one agent.

If one goes for the first option, the argumentation must proceed on theological and historical grounds. It is necessary to examine carefully what understanding of shared action appears in Gregory in order to resolve whether Hasker correctly interprets the passage he cites. It might also be necessary to examine what other Christian theologians, ecumenical councils, and the like say about the shared action of the Persons—depending on which sources one considers constitutive of doctrine and authoritative. If the second option is preferred, the

argumentation will be philosophical—one has to justify why, with the weaker cooperation of the Persons, we can continue to claim that they are one agent.¹⁶

4.1 FIRST OPTION: HARD INDIVISIBILITY

The first of these tasks was undertaken by Scott Williams. In a series of articles (2017, 2020, 2021), he argues with Hasker about, *inter alia*, precisely the question of the correct reading of the unity of action in Gregory. It should be noted, however, that Williams' aim is not to rescue the argument from the unity of action. In their polemic, Gregory is invoked as a theological authority, and agreement with Gregory's thought—or, more precisely, with his understanding of the unity of action—is supposed to be one of the criteria for deciding which model of the Trinity is better: Hasker's social model or Williams' Latin social (later also called conciliar social) model. The outcome of this discussion, however, is crucial in deciding which version of the argument from the unity of action Gregory was actually proposing. Let us now see what Williams argues regarding the cooperation of the Persons in Gregory.

First, he points out that in describing the actions of human beings, Gregory speaks of a common purpose (which people can share) as opposed to an individual action (which they do not share). Gregory contrasts the divine case with the human case—he explicitly proclaims that the same action is performed by all three Persons. The action is not “divided”, meaning that it is numerically one. Second, Williams points to the metaphysical basis for the unity of the action of the Persons. He agrees with Branson on the criteria of identity of action: he argues that the actions of the Persons are shared because there is nothing to distinguish the actions of one Person from the actions of the others (WILLIAMS 2021, 520–21). He also postulates a numerically one set of powers for Persons, which allows for a second metaphysical basis for the necessary unity of actions. As Williams claims, the Persons, by virtue of having the same nature, share the same powers, including will powers, and cannot use them separately—when one Person, for example, wants something, the others must want the same thing because they share numerically the same will.¹⁷ This renders

¹⁶ I am aware that the positions discussed in the elaborating on Branson's and Hasker's interpretations are not the only possible ways of understanding hard and soft indivisibility. I chose them because they are both readings of Gregory's position in the context of his argument and belong to the analytic debate about the Trinity. A fuller discussion of possible versions of the argument from the unity of action would also have to take into account other proposals for the interpretation of inseparable operations (e.g. CLAUNCH 2013; VIDU 2015; RADDE-GALLWIT, 2018).

¹⁷ In contrast to social theories that apply a modern concept of person that premises the person's identity on mental and volitional acts, Williams applies the conception proposed by Richard of

agreement between the Persons metaphysically necessary. The Persons do not need, as in Swinburne's model, to settle their spheres of action, because there cannot be a difference of preference between them (WILLIAMS 2017, 334).

But what about the example cited by Hasker of passing judgment to the Son, which seems inconsistent with the above understanding of the unity of action? First of all, contrary to Hasker, Williams argues that Gregory does not use this passage as an illustration of his views, but presents it as a potential counter-example from the Bible that he wants to reconcile with his position (WILLIAMS 2021, 521). According to Williams, sentences such as "the Father has passed judgment on the Son" can be explained using the doctrine of appropriation. It allows us to say that a particular Person of the Trinity does something, without implying that the other two do not (2021, 523). In contrast, the places where Gregory seems to "distribute" actions between the Persons using phrases like "from the Father, through the Son, in the Spirit" are explained by Williams as Gregory's attachment to the language of the New Testament, and Williams denies them metaphysical significance (521–22).

Many points in Williams' argument seem compelling. Gregory, writing about action, undoubtedly contrasts the human and the divine cases. He also undoubtedly insists that divine action is not divided and that the number of actions is not dependent on the number of those who perform them (*GNO* 3/1, 47.4–48.8, 50.10–12; *NPNF* 5, 334). The metaphysical justification for the unity of action given by Williams seems more controversial. As we saw in the previous section, the argument that the action of each Person is one because it does not differ in properties presupposes the controversial principle of the identity of indiscernibles and thus seems unconvincing. Even if such argumentation were to be found in Gregory's text, it would have to be rejected as metaphysically erroneous. Justifying the unity of action by having numerically the same powers also seems controversial. Williams assumes in his model that "there is just one concrete instance or trope of the divine nature" and that "divine persons have their rational powers (i.e., intellect, will) in virtue of the one divine nature.

Saint Victor and thus allows for the same mental and volitional acts in different persons (WILLIAMS 2013, 88–92). He also argues that adopting a "modern" or Lockean conception of a person weakens the unity of the will of the Persons too much making it non-necessary (WILLIAMS 2017). However, Hasker argues that Gregory should be attributed with an understanding of the person similar to that that appears in social trinitarianism (2013, 26–39). Hasker's interpretation is contested by King (2022). Gregory's notion of the person has been analysed by Turcescu (2002), among others. Unfortunately, there is no space here to examine in detail the question of the influence of Gregory's notion of person on the understanding of the shared action of the Persons; this is an interesting avenue to pursue in further research.

Consequently, the divine persons share numerically the same rational powers of intellect and will” (WILLIAMS 2017, 324–25). Meanwhile, as convincingly argued by Cross (2002, 397–408), Gregory adopts for natures the theory of universals *in re*.¹⁸ Natures, according to Gregory, are something single, simple, indivisible, and fully present in the individuals of those natures. In Gregory’s ontology, there are no instances of natures or tropes at all. Divine persons have numerically one universal divine nature, but analogously human persons have numerically one universal human nature (*Ad Ablabium* begins with this analogy and Gregory does not reject it). For Gregory a numerically one universal nature implies the numerically identical powers, but again, human persons and other creatures also have the numerically identical powers based on this theory. There is no identity of will or action between creatures. So, from the numerical unity of nature and powers, no identity of will or action follows on the grounds of Gregory’s ontology.

There is unfortunately no room here for a more detailed discussion of Williams’ take on Gregory’s view. If Williams is right, so much the better for the argument from the unity of action. It should be noted, however, that scholars’ opinions on Gregory’s understanding of unity of action are divided. Ayres, like Williams, rejects the weak understanding of unity of action as cooperation and speaks of one action shared by the Persons. On the other hand, he writes of the Persons together “constituting” one action and of “the way in which a person contributes to the divine activity”, which suggests some complexity of shared action (AYRES 2002, 357–59). Anatolios, on the other hand, disagrees with the thesis that persons simply have a single action, as he ascribes more importance to the “distribution” of action between Persons by using different verbs (ANATOLIOS 2011, 220ff.)—as I mentioned above, Williams argued that this practice is a repetition of biblical language that carries no ontological consequences. Moreover, even if this analysis of Gregory’s position is correct, one can further have some doubts about the cooperation of the Persons. It may be pointed out that other theologians understand the unity of action less strictly¹⁹ and that there is no sufficiently strong basis for us to regard this theory of Gregory as the correct and valid interpretation of Christian doctrine. One may not want a strong unity of action of the Persons because of the theological and philosophical implications.

¹⁸ A similar position is presented in analytical discussions of universals in ARMSTRONG (1980).

¹⁹ So do the other Cappadocian fathers, for example. As Morales argues: “ni Basile de Césarée, ni Grégoire de Nazianze n’ont jamais écrit, dans les œuvres que nous avons conservées d’eux, qu’il y avait «une unique opération» dans la Trinité” (2021, 632).

Finally, one may argue that we simply know too little to be able to determine the internal structure of the actions of the Trinity in relation to the world.

4.2 SECOND OPTION: SOFT INDIVISIBILITY

I argue below that even one to whom hard indivisibility of action of the Persons seems doubtful can accept Gregory's argument. I will try to show that in some special cases of interaction among people, we are inclined to speak of a single agent, and that we can consider the Trinity as analogous.

An interesting analogy can be found in Leftow in the context of counting Gods and Divine Persons:

If Jane did a ballet solo dressed as an elf, then later Mary did the same solo, it would make sense to say, "I saw one dancer, an elf, twice." In speaking so, we would note that the elf-role was played twice, and count dancers as distinct only if they play different roles. We would abstract from the identities of the bodies involved and of Jane and Mary. We would count dancers as the story of the ballet may count them. (2012, 316)

In this story, Jane and Mary are the same dancer. Leftow does not use it, however; he presents it solely to move on to the next story, in which Jane dances first as an elf, then as a clown. He proposes to count the Gods as we would count the "bodies" (in the second story—one Jane), and the Divine Persons as we would count the roles (in the second story—elf and clown). I argue that we should do exactly the opposite: count the Divine Persons analogously to the "bodies", and the Gods according to the roles played. In that case, to present an adequate analogy, one must of course return to the version of the story quoted above: Jane and Mary dance a single role. By analogy, Father, Son, and Spirit are one God.

This analogy is, of course, far from perfect. We do not, for instance, want a temporal succession in playing the role of the elf. For this reason, I would like to propose another analogy to illustrate the proposed account of the Trinity. One New Year's Eve evening I met up with some friends and we decided to play board games. The choice fell on Wingspan. However, there was a problem. Due to the limited number of player boards, the maximum number of players in this game was five, while there were seven of us. In order not to exclude anyone from the game, the three of us decided to play together. Throughout the game, they decided and executed every move together. There were seven people at the table, although the game allowed five players. Three people were one player.

Two "worlds" appear in this story—our world, in which we speak of individuals, and the world of the game, in which we speak of players. By analogy,

we can consider the Trinity in “ad intra” and “ad extra” orders. Every effect of the shared action of the persons playing, and therefore every movement in the game, is undoubtedly shared by the three persons. One can consider the movement in the game as an effect (in Gregory’s terminology: *ergon*²⁰) that is caused by the actions of three persons. It seems that using Gregory’s categories (*energeia*, *ergon*) it is possible to speak of multiple actions contributing to a single effect. Such a situation can also be represented by contemporary ontologies of power. For example, Molnar calls cases in which multiple manifestations of power produce a single effect polygeny (MOLNAR 2003, 194–95). With this interpretation, the action of the Persons will be “inseparable” in the sense that for every effect to which one of the Persons contributes, the others also contribute. The proposed analogy is an example of soft indivisibility; however, it can be developed to fit the different versions of cooperation distinguished by Leftow. The persons playing undoubtedly cooperate, but they may do so in several ways: perhaps they agree on who will make which move, perhaps each person contributes equally or unequally to each move.

In asking how to interpret the shared action of the divine Persons, I posed two more questions: should all the actions of the Persons be taken into account, or only a subset of them? Should the Persons be required to interact out of necessity, and if so, what kind of necessity is involved? Regarding the first question, I propose to consider all actions in relation to the world as required to speak of one God, just as unity of all actions within a game was required to speak of one player. What is meant here are actions “proper to God”, that is, actions that God performs by his infinite power. I prefer, however, not to settle on whether such actions include only Gregory’s proposed “seeing the thoughts of a man”.

A final question remains: do Persons cooperate out of necessity? The proposed analogy may seem too weak in this respect. After all, is it not the case that the persons playing have simply agreed to be one player? It would be perfectly possible for a fourth person to join them, or for one of the playing persons, instead of playing with the other two at some point, to replace another player who quit during the game. If one of the divine Persons could similarly change their mind, e.g. start acting independently of the other two from a certain point in history, the consequences for the doctrine would be disastrous—suddenly

²⁰ In his interpretation of Gregory’s position, Branson (2014, 294–95) equates the terms “*energeia*” and “*ergon*”, treating them as synonyms, the former being more philosophical and the latter colloquial. I consider this move to be misguided. As Barnes (2001, 278) notes, Gregory points out that the same action (*energeia*) can have different kinds of effects (*ergon*) while treating action as the cause of multiple effects. He illustrates this with the operation of fire—heat, which produces effects as diverse as softening bronze, hardening mud, melting wax or destroying flesh.

one God would be transformed into two. However, this objection can be answered. First, the requirement of metaphysical necessity for unity of action is too strong, perhaps. The divine Persons would, as it were, be forced to cooperate, which may not be a desirable conclusion. Moreover, as I pointed out above, the metaphysical basis for the necessity of unity of action proposed so far is quite questionable. Secondly, a proponent of the solution presented here could make use of Hasker's argument, namely, to justify the necessity of unity of action by appealing to the perfect goodness and omniscience of the Persons. Finally, perhaps the claim that the Persons simply decided to always act together in relation to the world is not as controversial as it seems. If we accept that God's decisions can be a source of necessity (e.g., we recognise that God established the laws of nature and that they apply by necessity), perhaps we can accept that the Trinity can also make this kind of decision regarding its own actions in relation to the world.

The presented view of the cooperation of the Persons makes it possible to propose a solution to the problem of the Trinity. As I wrote in the introduction, in the doctrine of the Trinity one can find a problematic set of sentences that seems to yield a contradiction. The Father is God, the Son is God, the Holy Spirit is God. The Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Holy Spirit, the Father is not the Holy Spirit. There is one God. Interpreting these sentences according to the assumptions made while presenting the argument from the unity of action, the following paraphrases can be proposed:

x is God	x performs divine actions ²¹
x is not y	x is not strictly identical to y
There is one God.	There is an x such that x performs divine actions and for all y, if y performs divine actions, then x and y have inseparable operations

where

x and y have inseparable operations iff
 (hard indivisibility) for each action z, x performs z \leftrightarrow y performs z
 or
 (soft indivisibility) for each effect z, x contributes to z \leftrightarrow y contributes to z.

²¹ Or perhaps x has powers to perform divine actions.

The first possible formalisation of having inseparable operations corresponds to the hard indivisibility presented in the previous section. Every action of any of the Divine Persons is also performed by the other Persons; every divine action belongs to all the Divine Persons without distinction of degree or manner. The second option of formalisation corresponds to the soft indivisibility presented in this section. When one Person causes an effect in the world through their action, the other Persons always cooperate. Their actions contributing to a given effect may be different, but they always occur together and in this sense are inseparable.

On the proposed account of the Trinity the predicate “is God” is true of each of the Persons and only of them. However, because of the change in counting, the Persons count as one God. The above solution in both variants logically belongs to the type often referred to as Relative Identity Trinitarianism, which can also, somewhat more accurately, be described as a Non-Classical-Identity-Counting Family (BRANSON 2019, 1085–86). Indeed, contradictions are avoided by introducing a non-standard way of counting gods. The Father is the same agent—God—that the Son is. But the Father is not the same person that the Son is.

This solution also resembles so-called functional monotheism which “asserts that the Persons exhibit unity, i.e. that they always function *ad extra* as one” (LEFTOW 2009, 72). This claim is of course accepted on the grounds of the proposed solution. However, the logic is different from the logic typical of functional monotheism since God is not an additional fourth agent—a group made up of Persons as in many functional solutions (cf. e.g. MCINTOSH 2016). God is not something additional that Persons somehow constitute—just as in the story about playing a board game each of the three persons was a player, all three persons were the same player, but no additional fourth entity was thereby created.

As I indicated above, this position can also be viewed as a reversal of Latin Trinitarianism—Leftow argued that the Trinity is like one God in three roles, whereas I propose to think of the Trinity as three Persons in one role.

Finally, let me make a certain proviso as the following doubt arises: it seems that the postulated unity of the Divine Persons is quite weak—weaker than commonly accepted by theologians.²² It should be noted, however, that the unity of action is emphasized in the context of the problem at hand, but it is not the only way in which the Persons are united. Actions play a key role because they serve to explain why Christians can say that there is one God. But this by no means implies that, for example, the unity of nature is rejected.

²² I thank the anonymous reviewer for bringing this issue to my attention.

Nothing prevents Persons from having one nature, power, authority, dignity, sovereignty, etc., as the creeds require (TANNER 1990, 28, 114), or from being connected by appropriate relations of origin. These unities have their important roles; for example, the unity of nature guarantees the equality of the Persons. It excludes heresies that regard the Son or the Spirit as creatures or ascribe to them some kind of divinity other than that proper to the Father. The relations of origin between the Persons imply, in turn, the qualitative unity of their nature and guarantee that the Father is the only “Source Without Source” or “First Principle”. However, this is not decisive for the question raised in this article about the apparent logical contradiction of the Christian doctrine. At the same time, we should remember that this question is only one of many that can be asked about the Trinity. Thus, the answer to it is by no means all we can say of the Trinity, much less does it exhaust or in any way violate the mystery of the Trinity. Similarly, for Gregory, the argument analysed here does not, of course, constitute the whole trinitarianism; he also wrote about the divinity of the Spirit (*Ad Eustachium*), the equality of the nature of the Father and the Son (*Contra Eunomium*) or the relations of origin between the Persons (the last part of *Ad Ablabium*), and repeatedly stated that the divine nature is unknowable. These and the other philosophical and theological questions about the Trinity are undoubtedly worth investigating, but they are beyond the scope of this text, whose modest aim was to answer a logical problem.

CONCLUSION

It seems that the argument from the unity of action to the unity of God is defensible. It certainly cannot be dismissed as easily as Hasker would like. As I have shown, there are two ways to defend the argument. The first assumes hard indivisibility of the actions of the Trinity. This route was taken by Williams. As I have indicated, his interpretation of Gregory’s text seems compelling, although serious doubts can be raised about his proposed metaphysical justification for the necessity of the unity of the Trinity’s actions. The second way of defending the argument from the unity of action presupposes a soft indivisibility of the actions of the Trinity while allowing for various interpretations of this cooperation. It seems that even with the weakening of the cooperation of the Persons, Gregory’s argument can still work.

Accepting either version of the argument allows one to construct a solution to the problem of the Trinity, and thus to propose paraphrases of problematic

sentences belonging to the doctrine. This solution, as coming from Gregory of Nyssa, fulfils the methodological requirement posed in the introduction—it does not constitute a revision of the doctrine, but a clarification of it. It also appears to be an interesting option, so far absent from contemporary analytical debate (despite some similarities with so-called functional monotheism). The solution presented here is of course very sketchy. Many questions, such as those about the metaphysics of shared action or the kind of necessity to which the cooperation of Persons is to be subjected, need to be answered. Also, an examination of the compatibility of the proposed solution with the later development of the doctrine of the Trinity and the impact of the adoption of this solution on other philosophical problems originating in Christian theology may provide an interesting direction for further research.

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FROM INSEPARABLE OPERATIONS TO THE UNITY OF GOD: ANALYTIC READINGS
OF GREGORY OF NYSSA'S TRINITARIAN ARGUMENTATION

Summary

In contemporary analytic philosophy, there is an ongoing discussion on how the Christian doctrine of the Trinity can be consistent, that is, how three divine Persons can be one God. To solve this problem, many authors go back to the fourth-century sources. In this article, I reconstruct one of Gregory of Nyssa's Trinitarian arguments presented in *Ad Ablabium*, which starts from the inseparable operations of the Persons to show that there is one God. I then examine contemporary analytic interpretations of this argument proposed by Beau Branson and William Hasker. Finally, I show two ways of defending the argument against objections by adopting either a stronger or a weaker version of the inseparable operations thesis.

Keywords: Trinity; Gregory of Nyssa; inseparable operations

OD JEDNOŚCI DZIAŁANIA DO JEDNOŚCI BOGA: ANALITYCZNE INTERPRETACJE
TRYNITARNEJ ARGUMENTACJI GRZEGORZA Z NYSSY

Streszczenie

We współczesnej filozofii analitycznej trwa dyskusja, jak chrześcijańska doktryna o Trójcy może być niesprzeczna – jak trzy Osoby boskie mogą być jednym Bogiem. By rozwiązać ten problem, wielu autorów sięga do źródeł z IV wieku. W tym artykule rekonstruuje jeden z argumentów trynitarnych Grzegorza z Nyssy przedstawiony w *Ad Ablabium*, który wychodzi od jedności działania Osób by pokazać, że jest jeden Bóg. Następnie analizuje współczesne analityczne interpretacje tego argumentu zaproponowane przez Beau Bransona i Williama Haskera. Wreszcie wskazują na dwa sposoby obrony argumentu przed zarzutami: poprzez przyjęcie albo mocniejszej, albo słabszej wersji tezy o jedności działania.

Słowa kluczowe: Trójca; Grzegorz z Nyssy; jedność działania