

# The Dialogical Self Analogy for the Godhead: Recasting the “God is a Person” Debate<sup>\*</sup>

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**Summary.** May God may be understood and referred to as a “person”? This is a live debate in contemporary theological and philosophical circles. However, despite the attention this debate has received, the vital question of how to account for God’s trinitarian nature has been mostly overlooked. Due to trinitarian concerns about the unqualified use of “person” as an analogy for the Godhead, I intervene in this debate with a two-fold proposal. The first is that proponents of using a person as an analogy for the Godhead will be better served by using a psychologically informed analogy of a “self” instead. In particular, the Dialogical Self model of a person holds much promise. In what follows, I argue that the “Dialogical Self Analogy” for the Godhead is more likely to uphold God’s trinitarian nature, avoid trinitarian confusion and related problems than “person” analogies do. The primary benefit of speaking of God as

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a Dialogical Self is that it offers a psychologically modelled analogy for God, whilst avoiding the language of person, yet strongly taking into account God's trinitarian nature. This has the important benefit of preserving the concept and language of "person" for the trinitarian persons (the prosopa/hypostases), and hence avoiding the linguistic, conceptual and ecumenical confusion that arises when referring to the Godhead as a person. The strength of using the model and language of a Dialogical Self as an analogy for the Godhead (instead of person) is demonstrated by showing its compatibility with Erickson's criteria for describing the Trinity.

**Keywords:** Trinity; Person; Personalism; Dialogical Self Theory; Dialogical; Analogy, God.

## 1. Introduction: Why psychological science may help us understand and relate to God as person

In his *Confessions*, Augustine prayed: "... You made us with yourself as our goal, and our heart is restless until it rests in you" (Augustine 2018, 3). In this prayer, Augustine refers to God as a "you," a "you" who is available for a loving interpersonal relationship with human beings. Indeed, throughout the *Confessions*, Augustine speaks to God as if he were alike a human person with a distinct personality and who acts in interpersonal ways. Augustine pointed out that we only find our own person's rest in a personal relationship with God when we understand him as a "You" who is the grounds of a "you-to-me" relationship (Stump 2016, 107–108). For Augustine, God is akin to a human person, and may be related to as a person of sorts. So God is personal and alike a person in a number of ways, yet Augustine was deeply aware that God is not one person or a mere person. All analogies have limits and when it comes to the Godhead, this limitation is driven by the fact that God is God the Trinity: one God in three persons with differentiation within the unity of God (Augustine, *Letter 169*). In the course of his magisterial *The Trinity*, his efforts to affirm to oneness and the threeness of God included his use of the psychological analogy for God as well as social ones. The psychological analogy for the Trinity deployed human psychology as the basis for its explanatory scope; by means of it he could include the key facets of God's oneness, threeness, as well as the rich trinitarian relations that make God who he is (Augustine 1963, books 8–11). Augustine's deployment of psychological insights for the sake of

ensuring the trinitarian structure of Christian devotion and maintaining God's oneness-in-threeness for theology is an instructive example for Christians across the ages. This essay will follow in his example of using psychological science of the day as the foundation for an analogy for the Godhead that can account for his oneness-in-threeness.

Today Sarah, a fellow member of my local church, also prays to God as a "you," and has interpersonal expectations of God. Her person-to-person expectations include anticipating that God will thoughtfully respond to her prayers, take care of her wellbeing, both hear and receive her worship, and be present to her in Christ in the Eucharist, as well as uniting her to himself via the Holy Spirit. Sarah is typical of Western Christians, for whom "the idea that God is a 'person' is a necessary and fundamental part of their beliefs" (Te Velde 2011, 359). If Sarah were prohibited from thinking of the Godhead as a person, it would be difficult for her to think of God as eternally interactive and loving; and if God were none of those things, how could God be worthy of worship? To have a personal relationship with God seems to require that God is a person. The notion of God as a person is far more preferable than the alternative, which is that God is a non-person.

Both St. Augustine and Sarah treat God in a manner that is very similar to the ways in which we deal with human persons. But is the concept and language of person appropriate and helpful for relating and referring to God? Moreover, how do we deal with the fact that God is the Godhead of three hypostases, a Trinity of persons? How does Sarah, for example, relate to God as one person, yet have expectations such as that one divine hypostases in particular (God the Son incarnate) be especially and uniquely present in the Lord's Supper or primarily responsible for her union with God (God the Holy Spirit)? Thus, not only do we have to deal with the issue of referring to God as a person, but as the Trinity of three hypostases (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), and in turn how this affects the way we incorporate person language into our references for, and expectations of, God.

Further, not only do we have the question of the appropriateness of person language for God, but also the problem of potentially using differ-

ent senses for the same terminology: namely, using the term person for God in an *absolute* sense with respect to the Godhead, and in a particular *simpliciter* sense with respect to each person of the Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). In his own time, Augustine employed his own psychological analogy for speaking about the oneness and threeness of the trinitarian Godhead. But for Sarah today, what resources may she draw upon? More specifically, what resources from psychological science are at Sarah's disposal today?

Before moving to Dialogical Self Theory and its model of the human person, we need to set the context and contours for using it within the "Is God a person?" debate. There is a lively debate about whether or not the Godhead can be conceived as a person. Hewitt states that believing that God is a person is "a common current of opinion both inside and outside the academy. The claim that God is a person is a force to be reckoned with in the philosophy of religion" (Hewitt 2018, 5). It is important to note that there is some disagreement in terms of the nature of the language we apply to God – i.e. univocal or analogous – the view that God counts as a person is popular. In addition, it is noteworthy that the majority of the "God is a person" authors also hold that God is personal in terms of his interactions with others. On the first point see (Harrower 2014).

A sharp divide exists between theologians who claim the Godhead may be conceived of as a person, and those who claim that he is not. That God may be understood, and referred to, as a person is affirmed to different degrees by contemporary scholars such as Plantinga. He states this in the context of arguing that God is not a property: "No property could have created the world; no property could be omniscient, or, indeed, know anything at all. If God is a property, then he isn't a person but a mere abstract object; he has no knowledge, awareness, power, love or life" (Plantinga 1980, 47). Page (2019), Stump (2016), Burns (2015) and Grimi (2018) also affirm this line of thinking. On the affirmative side of the debate, Swinburne has claimed that it is normative for Christians to understand God as a person: viewing God as a person is "the most elementary claim of theism" (Swinburne 1993, 101). For myself, due to concerns I call "trinitarian unease," I am more comfortable speaking of God as *personal* rather

than as a person, and of reserving the language of person for the trinitarian persons.

Employing an unqualified or vague concept of “person” as an analogy for the Godhead faces problems including (1) the lack of warrant for regarding God as a person; (2) novelty in terms of use; (3) destabilizing the settled conciliar tradition with reference to using person to refer to divine persons; (4) confusion: applying the concept and language of person to the Godhead in addition to the trinitarian persons (the prosopa/hypostasis) is likely to cause referential and conceptual confusion because the same language would be used to point out two different realities to do with the divine life; (5) The problem of initiating further debate; (6) explicit denial: luminaries in both the Roman Catholic and the Protestant tradition at times explicitly deny the use of person to refer to the Godhead; (7) ad hoc use only in the history of Christian theology; (8) excellent Christological and trinitarian reasons for restricting the use of person to the divine hypostasis and to human beings; (9) meeting the development of doctrine criterion; (10) the absence of a contemporary analogy for how a human person could serve as an analogy of the God’s trinitarian life. The best case for restricting the language of person to the divine prosopa/hypostases is made by (Ratzinger 1990).

However, I acknowledge that there are specific contexts within which we should refer to God as a person rather than a non-person, yet I would argue that whenever we use the language of person in an absolute sense for the Godhead, it needs to be heavily qualified. For example, I refer to God as “Absolute Person” in light of his trinitarian nature in (Harrower 2019, 12). Therefore, within this debate, my focus is on how successful the models of person used for God either do or do not account for God’s trinitarian nature. For example, when referring to God as an analogy of a person, Swinburne projects a monistic individualist view of a human person onto God: God is: “something like a ‘person without a body (i.e. a spirit) who is eternal, free, able to do anything, knows everything, is perfectly good, is the proper object of human worship and obedience, the creator and sustainer of the universe” (Swinburne 1993, 1). More recently he has restated his view that God is a person: God is “a person without a body

(i.e. a spirit), present everywhere, the creator and sustainer of the universe, a free agent, able to do everything (i.e. omnipotent), knowing all things, perfectly good, a source of moral obligation, immutable, eternal, a necessary being, holy, and worthy of worship” (Swinburne 2016, 2). In this example, Swinburne uses the analogy of a person for God, yet does so with God’s oneness clearly in view, but his trinitarian nature is entirely absent from playing any role in the analogy – God sounds very much like a mere individual.

In today’s secular context Swinburne’s view of what kind of person God is sounds like an independent individual, known as the “Buffered Self” approach to the person (Taylor 2007, 25–40; Smith 2014, 140–142). This definition of the person, or self, sees them as buffered in that they are a single self who is self-enclosed, self-determined, and primarily self-focused. The Buffered Self is not a self who is comprised of internal relations, but is essentially a monadic self-made and self-standing “I.” On this view the person is neither essentially relational nor conversational – neither within their own being nor in their relationships to others. To my mind, any model of a person that is alike the secular buffered secular individual is a very poor analogy for the Christian God, who is necessarily one God comprised of three “I”’s in relation to one another and who are identified with the divine substance.

If we are going to speak about God as a person in our secular context, we need to find a richer model for what a person is, so that we take account of both God’s oneness and threeness (or one-in-threeness) when we speak about the Godhead by means of an analogy with a human person. This is why I will shortly turn to Dialogical Self Theory as a rich and robust model for the human person that can serve as the basis for an analogy for speaking of God in a way that can account for his trinitarian nature. Before doing so, it is worth noting some reasons for why theologians do not deal with God’s triune nature, as well as some of the very significant worldview implications of dealing with God as a mere individual rather than a trinitarian being.

Trinitarian unease provides the warrant for a number of explicit and implicit reasons that may be factors in theological and philosophical reti-

cence when it comes to developing analogies for God as a person that can take his triune nature into account. Amongst the key ones are (a) ignorance of models of a person that go beyond proposing that they are a Cartesian individual; and (b) the problem of potential confusion generated by applying the concept and language of person to the Godhead in addition to the trinitarian persons (the prosopa/hypostases). Where problem (a) may be solved by research into the psychological sciences, problem (b) is hard to overcome unless there is a shift away from using the language (but not the concept) of person for the Godhead because such dual use of person language is likely to cause referential and conceptual confusion because the same language would be used to point out two different realities to do with the divine life. We now turn to the significant meta-theological and meta-ethical implications of disregarding God's trinitarian nature in the discussions of whether or not he is alike a person.

## 2. Theological Problems resulting from Trinitarian Unease

There are significant worldview consequences of arguing that God is a person akin to a single buffered human individual. The perspective on God and the meta-ethics that flows from it may be described as "individualistic personalism." Individualistic personalism *is the view that God is a person, has a unique personality, and interacts with humans and angels in interpersonal ways, yet his personality and interactions are not clearly dependent on, nor shaped by the fact that he is God the Trinity.* The problem with this view is chiefly that it ignores God's triadic nature as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Dealing with God in an absolute manner without regard for his trinity closely resembles the Islamic view of God. Therefore it is an anti-realist view. In addition, it also resembles the God of Deism, the God of the rationalist. Such deism comes at massive metaphysical, and meta-ethical cost. It comes at the loss of "trinitarian personalism," which is the theological and ethical view that *God's triune nature as three divine persons in holy and loving relationships of mutual-recognition and creativity demonstrates that persons-in-relationship are the primary, most valuable, as well fundamental generating points and sources in reality – thereby providing*

*theological orientation to human reality as persons-in-relationships and ethical orientation because humanity's highest goals are dependent upon holy and loving persons-in-relationships.*<sup>1</sup>

Trinitarian personalism is a uniquely revealed Christian foundation for human life and ethics, which works from the fact of God's trinitarian nature as the core reality in the cosmos. It is a very powerful and all-encompassing worldview: God's relational life as persons-in-relationship provides the theological and ethical framework for understanding human nature and also those works by which the Trinity enables human people and groups to pursue holy and loving moral inter-personalism as the highest goal of existence. If the nature of the Trinity is dropped from the analogy for the Godhead, we run the risk of relegating trinitarian personalism to the secular dustbin. Yet, within humans there is a craving for a relational reality, which may be why in the wake of relegating the Trinity to the sidelines of theology, a number of non-trinitarian efforts have tried to recapture the relational nature of reality.

Very serious and significant efforts to re-center reality on a kind of relational personalism – such as the panentheistic or pantheistic oneness personalism, or oneness Pentecostalism, or merely individualistic personalism – have recently tried to fill this void, with increasing popularity. The common denominator amongst these is the search for non-trinitarian avenues of establishing human relationality with God and others: such as creation participating within God himself, or his spiritual relationships with human beings. To my mind, disregarding God's trinitarian nature is as serious as arguing that God is more alike a non-person

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<sup>1</sup> More fully, trinitarian personalism is a meta-physical and meta-ethical view that stems from the fact that *God is the Trinity: the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Given the trinity, the generative core of reality is a spiritual being who is loving and holy in his own personal and intra-personal life, and is thus worthy of worship per se. The triadic perfect life of God establishes the personalist principle for metaphysics and meta-ethics – which is that persons in holy and loving relationships are the ideal priority at all times. The personalist principle of prioritizing persons in relationship over all other things is expressed in Christian worship and by appropriately emulating a human nature-appropriate version of God's moral, relational, creative and perspectival perfections for the sake of the common good and the glorification of God. The personalist response to God is trinitarian because it is enabled by the Spirit of Christ and moves believers to participate in God's renewal of all things by the missions of the Son and of the Spirit.*



than a person, because without these trinitarian foundations it is harder to hold that persons-in-holy-and-loving relations are the essential and most valuable reality at the core of cosmic life (Cole 2016). Due to the seriousness of the theological issues at hand, in what follows I address the need to find a richer model of a person in order to account for God's trinitarian nature when we speak of him as such. The first step is to replace our language of the person with the language of a self, and the second is to understand such a self as a dialogical kind of a self. The result is that rather than referring to God as a person, which creates a number of difficulties, we can more thoughtfully speak of God as a dialogical self. The result of these shifts in language and concept is to deploy Dialogical Self Theory as a model that serves as the human analogy for speaking of God as a personal being who is the rich inter-relationality of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

### **The Self**

A human self can serve as our analogy for the Godhead. A human self is a being with the capacity to be self-reflexive and identify themselves as "me." The self "is an 'I' that thinks and a 'me' that is the content of those thoughts" (Oyserman, Elmore and Smith 2012, 73). In other words, a self stands behind reflexive thought: "reflecting on oneself is both a common activity and a mental feat. It requires that there is an 'I' that can consider an object that is 'me'." The term self includes both the actor who thinks ('I am thinking') and the object of thinking ('about me'). Moreover, the actor both is able to think and is aware of doing so" (Oyserman, Elmore and Smith 2012, 72). The self is the integration of all the structures, processes and phenomena (including various I-positions as per below) that make up each "I." And such an "I" is the basis of intentions and is responsible for their actions. One way to recognize a self is that its life may be narrated in the real world; it can be a living subject of a story. Being the protagonist of a story distinguishes as self from impersonal mental processes, traits, feelings and opinions. Therefore, because long term stories can be told about them, Augustine and Sarah (mentioned above), count as selves (Belzen 2010, 403–404). The self may be an analogy for God as

a self-reflexive being, a being whose unity integrates all of whom he is, and is also identified as a self because real world stories may be told of him as their protagonist. In sum, a human self is analogous to God in that both the self and God are self-reflexive, intentional beings, of whom stories may be told. Below I suggest that because selves are internally complex, they serve as an analogy for the Godhead that at the same times takes into account the trinitarian plurality inherent to Godhead. This is followed by the point that God (and selves) are inherently relational.

### **Each Self is a psychological society**

Dialogical Self Theory belongs within psychological models of the human self that view persons as dynamic and internally social beings. DST also recognizes social dimensions and influences on one other (Moore, Jasper and Gillespie 2011). In fact, most branches of psychological science today propose that a human being is not essentially a monadic rational mind. In fact, humans are multifaceted composite beings. Van der Kolk writes that “[e]very major school of psychology recognizes that people have subpersonalities,” and that “[m]odern neuroscience has confirmed the notion of the mind as a kind of society” (van der Kolk 2014, 280). The empirical basis for this claim stems from the research of Michael Gazzaniga, “who conducted pioneering split-brain research, concluded that the mind is composed of semi-autonomous functioning modules, each of which has a special role” (ibid.). This research concurs with findings to do with studies on the complexity of personality as well as the factors that shape it. For example, Baumert et. al write: “personality processes, personality structure, and personality development have to be understood and investigated in integrated ways in order to provide comprehensive responses to the key questions of personality psychology” (Baumert et al. 2017, 503). The complexity of the self is shown by the fact that post-traumatic recovery and growth involves cultivating integration and synchronization between dissociative and often discordant areas of the brain and the self (van der Kolk 2014; Herman 2001).

Studies on parallel emotional processing in human beings that suggests that the mind is complex (Peyk 2009), and trauma studies that dem-

onstrate the extent to which a single self may become fragmented, dissociated, and within whom a number of parties will work against one another during recovery process. The complexity of the self is shown by the fact that post-traumatic recovery and growth involves cultivating integration and synchronization between dissociative and often discordant areas of the brain and the self (van der Kolk 2014; Herman 2001). Dialogical Self Theory draws upon findings such as these and related ones that indicate the internal richness of each human being, and has been developed and used clinically.

### 3. Dialogical Self Theory

Dialogical Self Theory offers conceptual models for the human person, in which the person is construed as an internally and externally communicative and relational self. I use notions of the self with Belzen's caution in mind. He writes that in terms of the "self": "we are not dealing here with anything that would be conceptually clear: after more than a century of research and theorizing, psychologists still can't tell what that is: self. Nor can they satisfyingly explain what 'mental health' is" (Belzen 2010, 399). One of the pioneers of DST theory, Hubert Hermans, recently summarized DST as follows:

In a nutshell DST assumes, firstly, that the self can be conceived as a "society of mind" or as a multiplicity of embodied I-positions among which dialogical relationships can exist, and, secondly, that the "I" is capable of shifting from one position to another in accordance with different, and even contrasting, situations. The self is not autonomous and unified, but dialogical and multiple; so, it is not a substance within itself but deeply relational (Hermans 2020, 232).

He continues: "And the other is not an outside entity but an existing part of the self." I don't take this to be relevant to the existence of the Godhead as classically conceived, this aspect of DST is more in concert with works such as (Hewitt, 2018).

Another way to state how DST conceives of a person is “the dialogical self is described as a democratic self” (ibid.). Hermans writes that “democracy as metaphor for a dialogical organization of the self as a society of mind” (ibid.). Salient aspects of DST’s model of a person that may be used as an analogy for the Godhead that at the same time may have affinities with God’s nature as the Trinity as described below. I acknowledge that this is my reading of DST, of which there are a number of models. I will list these aspects below, then draw them into conversation with Erickson’s standard conception of God the Trinity.

### **(1) A Dialogical Self is a unity of multiple I-positions:**

Each human being, or self, is a single entity. It is numerically one, yet each self has a rich internal life, comprised of I-positions (Hermans-Konopka 2012, 423). I-positions have been described as “subselves” or “inner voices” that are “just below the level of the whole” (Hermans 2002, 151, citing Hofstadter (1986, 782). For this reason, the major assumption of DST is that “the mind is polyphonic” (Hermans 2020, 231).

These I-positions are voices in the subjective experience of each human being. Each I-position is a perspective on the world and the voiced perspective that goes with this. For example, the voice that says “I am always ignored at work” or “I have a bad feeling about this.” There is a neurological basis for the fact that people experience the world through numerous perspectives and express these perspectives as I-positions. For example, when a person touches their hand to their cheek, they receive two inputs and two perspectives – from the cheek and from the hand respectively– when they do so. The cheek sends a message of touching the hand, and vice versa, the hand sends a message of touching the cheek. These are two different sensory experiences and messages. The mind is dialogical (conversational) in that it has to handle the sensory input, neurological exchange and resulting interaction between the cheek being touched and the hand touching it (Hermans 2002, 152).

A human self is a single being. The plurality of each self in terms of I-positions does not undermine its unity. The self is the united life of the I-positions, even if the I-positions do not relate well to each other. Even

in a disordered self, there is not a self without the interactive life (the existence-in-unity) of the I-positions. In other words, each particular self being is itself due to the existence of various I-positions. In addition to essential unity of the I-positions that constitutes the self, there is functional unity between the I-positions: “attention, action and motivation synchronize the brain so that its activities are unified” (Hermans 2002, 150). Psychological science suggests that human beings are neurologically wired up as dialogical selves who by nature manage the inter-relationships of I-positions within themselves. For example, consider the dialogical conversation that occurs within a child an infant who falls off the skateboard they just got for Christmas. They fall off the board and scrape their knee on the pavement. Two I-positions may quickly develop within the one person, one is “my knee really hurts, I am in pain,” and another I-position is that of their inner helper: “I can help.” Another might be, “I look clumsy to others when I fall off.”

Psychological science shows that a successfully developing children and infants will demonstrate the ability to co-ordinate their I-positions in such situations. This co-ordination is shown when they shape their mouth to kiss the knee even before they touch the knee to their mouth; this demonstrates their ability to co-ordinate the I-position stemming from pain in the knee – “my knee really hurts, I am in pain” – and the I-position of their inner helper (the helper “I”) can help (ibid.). Therefore, human persons are dialogical selves, a unity of various I-positions. Importantly, the I-positions are not “extra” to the dialogical self. Each human dialogical self is constituted by these I-positions: who the self is and how the self relates to the world is determined by the interplay of the voices and viewpoints in the society of their mind. At this point we may make a distinction between person and a self. A is only ever one “I” or “I-position,” yet a self is the sum and union of a number of “I-positions.” So whereas a person may only ever speak from the point of view of one “I-position,” a self may speak from a number of perspectives that constitute who that self is.

**(2) The I-positions within the self are unique, yet relationally dependent upon one another:**

Each I-position contributes to how the person sees the world, with each voice being present yet taking a lead role at various points of experience and response to the world (Ribeiro and Gonçalves 2012, 309–311). In a healthy person, the I-positions and their voices are not independent from one another: they are related and vocalized with respect to one another (Hermans-Konopka 2012, 423). There is debate about the extent of dependence, co-operation, and autonomy between the self's I positions. Naturally, a fuller take on DST includes the influence of other persons on the formation of the self: see (Hermans-Konopka 2012, 423). On the one hand, some argue that there is a *relative autonomy between the I-positions, each shaping the self in a mostly independent manner* (Nir 2012, 284). Relative autonomy in this instance refers to “Each I-position is endowed with different views, memories, wishes, motives, interests and feelings, and therefore has a distinct story to tell from its own experience and its own stance” (ibid.). Notwithstanding the possibility of this kind of relative autonomy, and on the other hand, scholars argue for a negotiation process between these voices, which may come to compose a coherent self:

an individual involved in the act of identity construction brings these different voices/positions into open dialogue within the self and with others and in the process is able to move toward, move away or even oppose positions/voices he/she agrees with or disagrees with ... Hence, the act of self-construction is an ongoing negotiation process ... whereby the self has the ability to integrate mutual and opposing voices/positions into a coherent self of ‘who I am’ leading to construction of unity-in-multiplicity. (Eze, Lindegger and Rakoczy 2015, 400).

**(3) As vital aspects of the self, the I-positions are in communicative relationships with one another:**

Communication between a person's inner voices is core to DST theory, a “multiplicity of collective voices that create interfaces ... in the micro-society of the self” (Hermans 2011, 3). Hence, the I-positions relate to one

another within the self (Ribeiro and Gonçalves 2012, 309–11). The significance of this communication for the human person is shown in the fact that pathologies such as schizophrenia emerge when the I-positions are unable to communicate, or when a person is unable to switch from one I-position to another (Hermans 2002, 153).

**(4) The I-positions are in mutually influential relationships with one another:**

The I-positions influence one another: “the self is organized as a dialogical interchange between mutually influencing *I*-positions in the society of the mind” (Nir 2012, 284.) Hence, the relationships between the I-positions influence whom the self is, without compromising the unity of the self. That is, “[t]he I moves ... from the one to the other position, creating dynamic fields in which self-negotiations ... result in a great variety of meanings” (Hermans, 2001, 252).

**(5) There may be harmony between the I-positions and hence the self is an integrated being:**

As noted above, ideally, the self is a harmonious and coherent society of these voices (Eze, Lindegger and Rakoczy 2015, 400).

**(6) Agreed upon points of reference provide stability for the self because these points of reference frame the healthy relational patterns between I-positions:**

One contributing factor to the harmony between these voices, and hence the unity of the self, is the “frames” within which they operate (Moore, Jasper and Gillespie 2011, 510). Stability of self may be achieved through reference to, and the impact of “norms, values, material objects, and institutions” on the I-positions (*ibid.*). These frames serve to guide the harmony, unity and interactions between I-positions by promoting some views and not others with reference to prior agreed upon norms (*ibid.*, 512). Frames work by “subjecting” or constraining the I-positions “to normative ‘standards,’ to social appraisal based on norms of honesty, ef-

iciency, economy, safety, elegance, tactfulness, good taste, and so on” (ibid.). That is, “Each frame consists of expectations which are unique to that frame. These expectations are the manifestation of the group’s view towards the individual, the basis for both praise and blame, and thus provide powerful guidance of individual ‘doing’” (ibid., 512–513).

#### **4. Dialogical Self theory as an analogy for the kind of Person that the Trinitarian Godhead**

At first glance, it seems that DST’s model of a person appears to provide a human analogy for how the Godhead could be conceived as a person or self, yet one who is comprised of three I-positions. An immediately apparent example is that the Christian claim that “God is one being in three persons,” appears to be compatible with DST’s view that one’s self is one entity, yet composed of a number of I-positions (Ratzinger 1990, 444). This apparent affinity calls for closer inspection.

Now that we have outlined DST’s model of a person, we can ask whether this model of a person is more suitable as an analogy for the trinitarian Godhead than the “Buffered Self” models of the person. In what follows, I will show how each of the key points of DST outlined as 1–6 above correlate with key points of trinitarian theology if these were revised with a view to referring to the divine nature and to divine prosopa/hypostases. Once revised and taken together they would suffice to ensure the basic points of trinitarian theology as defined by Erikson’s Criteria for conceptualizing the Trinity. Millard Erickson writes that a number of necessary truths must be met and included in an orthodox doctrine of God the Trinity (Erickson 1998, 362–363). These are (1) the unity of God, (2) the deity of each trinitarian person, (3) the eternality of the Trinity, (4) the ways in which God is one and three are not the same, hence there is no contradiction involved in this doctrine, (5) temporary historical subordination does not mean eternal essential subordination, (6) there is a mystery at the core of trinitarian theology (ibid.). Follow up work will explore the degree to which a DST-based model for the Godhead is compatible with Holmes’ more exhaustive definition of the Trinity (Holmes 2014, 31).



“*The unity of God*” is matched by DST’s claims that a person is (1) “a *unity of multiple I-positions*”; in the case of the Godhead, this unity would be the perfectly harmonious unity of will and attributes, which is compatible with DST’s claim (5): “there may be harmony between the I-positions and hence the self is an integrated being.” Thus, Dialogical Self Theory may provide us with a way of understanding the uniqueness of God as a perfectly integrated trinitarian Godhead. In the same way that the unity of the Godhead is based upon the divine substance with which each divine person is identified, each I-position is ultimately identified with the substantial core of each human self which is the basis of their identity continuity through time. The fact that each person of the Trinity co-inheres one another (perichoresis), and the simplicity of God’s attributes further secure the unity and singularity of God. This divine self is the foundation that allows the I-positions to interact with one another within the unifying life of one God’s Self. The depths of God’s unity prevents the claim that in God there are multiple or different selves.

Erickson’s second desideratum is “*the deity of each trinitarian person*.” Though DST cannot offer the deity of each trinitarian person, its use of multiple I-positions within the single self is a limited analogy for trinitarian persons constituting the life of the Godhead. DST also offers an analogy for the way that trinitarian persons are who they are only in relation to one another via relations of origin and opposed relations, as per the conjunction of the following claims: “(2) The I-positions within the self are unique, yet relationally dependent upon one another,” “(3) As vital aspects of the self, the I-positions are in communicative relationships with one another,” “(4) The I-positions are in mutually influential relationships with one another.” The other point that is compatible with the deity of each divine person is that if each I-position in DST were divine it would function as an ontological as well as qualitative frame for the other I-positions. This would be compatible with “(6) Agreed upon points of reference (that) provide stability for the Self because these points of reference frame the healthy relational patterns between I-positions.”

“*The eternity of the Trinity*,” is compatible with the view that the self is a continuous entity across time.

*“The ways in which God is one and three are not the same, hence there is no contradiction involved in this doctrine,”* is compatible with the fact that for DST there is one self yet multiple I-positions, thus no contradiction between the oneness and multiplicity of DST’s view of a person.

The trinitarian claim that *“temporary historical subordination [of divine persons to one another] does not mean eternal essential subordination,”* aligns with the fact that in a healthy self, I-positions work together in democratic ways and action is guided by mutual consent rather than pre-established hierarchical relationships.

The trinitarian claim that *“there is a mystery at the core of trinitarian theology”* is compatible with the fact that each self is ultimately mysterious and hence escapes exhaustive investigation as well as explanation.

There seems to be no surface tension between Erickson’s definition of the Trinity and Dialogical Self Theory’s view of the self and the I-positions. As a caveat at this point, I recognize a drawback of this model for the person for referring to God the Trinity as a person is that it does not seem to strongly enough account for the unique and incommunicable nature of each divine hypostasis; however, this may be remedied via accounts of trinitarian relations of origin and opposed relations. Returning to the lack of theological surface tension, it opens the possibility of recasting the “Is God a person” debate in terms of the Godhead being modelled after a person understood as a Dialogical Self (O’Reilly and Franck forthcoming). Instead of referring to God as a person by way of analogy, we could refer to God as a self (a Dialogical Self) by way of analogy. As we shall see, the distinction between these goes far beyond terminology and is rooted in the capacity of a self to have multiple “I” positions, whereas a person has only one “I” position. The Dialogical Self Analogy for the Godhead is one example of how psychological science may help the tasks of Christians theology and philosophy. In this case, it provides an analogy for theologians who want to speak about God the Trinity as a person in an absolute sense (i.e. the Godhead), in a way that takes God’s trinitarian nature into account and reserves the technical language of person for the divine prosopa.

The suitability of the Dialogical Self Analogy for the Godhead is further suggested by the fact that proponents of DST must reckon with very

similar issues to those with which trinitarian theologians wrestle. For example, some of DST's proponents have struggled with the same issues of unity-in-plurality and distinction-in-unity that beset trinitarian theology. Consider Hermans' reflection and question, given that in a single self, "attention, action and motivation synchronize the brain so that its activities are unified." He asks, "How then can there be a coexistence of relatively autonomous I-positions? How can the person be one yet many?" (Hermans 2002, 150). Lewis struggles here too, and is promoted to probe the neurobiology of how there may be unity and as well as moving between I-positions in terms of how a Dialogical Self functions in the world (Lewis 2002); to my mind this loosely parallels the doctrine of appropriation for the Trinity.

## Conclusion

This essay has proposed the Dialogical Self Analogy for conceptualising the Godhead as a self, as an alternative to using the language of person for the Godhead. Such an analogy enables us to speak about Godhead along the conceptual lines offered by a human self, whilst also reckoning with his trinitarian nature, as shown by meeting Erickson's criteria for the Trinity. Its success also lies in speaking about God as self who is a unique relational and communicative kind of being, yet it reserves the language of a person for the divine prosopa/hypostases. Furthermore, this model of God may be the basis for a robust version of personalism as the foundation for theology and ethics. A number of avenues for further research into the nature of God persons have also been noted; these will likely benefit from the integration of psychological science with Christian theology and philosophy. Further work needs to outline and further exploring the person-substance relationships that Dialogical Self Analogy for the Godhead entails, with a view to ensuring this model is compatible with our received conciliar trinitarianism. Beyond situating a Dialogical Self Analogy within the bounds of Conciliar Trinitarianism, a more ambitious investigation could be made into whether the Dialogical Self Analogy for the Godhead may be situated within the development of Christian

doctrine as outlined by Vincent of Lérins in his classic fifth century work *Commonitorium* or Cardinal Henry Newman's *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*. Further to this, one could explore the compatibility of the Dialogical Self Analogy for the Godhead with Scott Williams' non-social indexical model of the Trinity, in which each divine person is able to take the position of an "I" within the Trinity's singular shared mental state and spiritual life (Williams 2013).<sup>2</sup> DST may also be employed to the end of providing a psychologically grounded account of "group self" analogy for the Trinity as proposed by C.J.F. Williams (Williams 1994).<sup>3</sup> Finally, a more experimental avenue for exploration would be to recast St. Richard of Victor's definition of a person as a "unique spiritual existence with a dialogical and relational nature," and note the different ways that this would seem to apply to the Godhead's dialogical self as well as to the divine prosopa/hypostases, yet without causing contradiction.

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<sup>2</sup> See also (Wechsler, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> Such a constructive project would have to deal with critiques including (Hasker, 2018) and (Hasker, 2013).

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