

Defending the Case for the Social Trinity by Extending the Concept of Perichoresis

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Christians who confess the doctrine of the Trinity naturally tend to think of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as distinct personal beings. In analogy with a human father and son, they are understood to be conscious individuals, related to one another in conversation, love, and action.

Believers would be surprised—even shocked—to learn that this way of thinking about the Trinity—a “social” Trinity—has been considered to be naïve and even heretical by some of the greatest theologians of the Christian church. Notable theologians have taught that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not personal in the way that persons are understood now. Thomas Aquinas taught that divine persons were really “subsistent relations” (*relationem ut subsistentem*) in the divine essence. Karl Barth believed that they were “modes of being” (*Seinweisen*) in the Godhead¹—not three distinct though unseparated centers of awareness in the one undivided divine nature.

¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Latin text and English trans., vol. 6 (New York: Blackfriars/McGraw-Hill, 1964), I, Q. 29, a. 4; 60: “‘divine person’ signifies relation as something subsisting.” Karl Rahner, following Aquinas in the “nonsocial” or “single consciousness” model of the Trinity, states that Father, Son, and Spirit are not three “persons” in the modern sense, but rather three distinct “manners of subsisting”: *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), 113.

Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of the Word of God*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T

This article defends a social model of the Trinity—a model instinctively held by ordinary readers of the New Testament—and argues that it is supported by Scripture, consistent with patristic and creedal orthodoxy, logically coherent, and not a form of tritheism. This social view has important practical implications for Christian faith, piety, and church life—providing a theological basis for healthy human relationships as well as partnership and cooperation in ministry.

Two new constructive proposals defending the social Trinity are presented here. In this model Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are understood to be fully united yet eternally distinct centers of knowledge, love, and will—related in ways analogous to a society of three human persons.² The first proposal (I) extends perichoresis³ from the two natures of Christ to the distinct—but not divided—states of consciousness of the three persons of the Trinity. The second (II) grounds the ontological unity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in fully reciprocal, fully congruent, nested relationships⁴—subsisting eternally and necessarily in the one undivided divine essence. The first proposal guards against the heresy of modalism. The second guards against the heresies of tritheism and subordinationism. In the course of the argument modernized versions of Gregory of Nyssa’s three-man analogy for the Trinity, and of Gregory of Nazianzus’s three suns analogy, will be presented.

Clark, 1956), IV/1:205, states that there are not in God “three different personalities, three self-existent individuals with their own special self-consciousness, cognition, volitions.... The one ‘personality’ of God, the one active and speaking divine Ego, is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Otherwise, we should obviously have to speak of three gods.” Barth’s “nonsocial” or one-Ego view of the Trinity, and Aquinas’s view of Father, Son, and Spirit as “subsistent relations” has seemed to critics to be a form of modalism—making the “persons” of the Trinity to be less, rather than more, “personal” than human persons. In the social Trinity defended in this article, the divine persons are not “subsistent relations,” but rather, *persons* subsisting in *mutual relations* within the divine essence.

² This definition is adopted from Cornelius Plantinga Jr., “Gregory of Nyssa and the Social Analogy of the Trinity,” *The Thomist* 50, no. 3 (1986): 325–52, esp. 325n1.

³ As defined in sec. (I) below.

⁴ The concept of nested relationships will be explained in sec. (II) below.

Social models of the Trinity have antecedents in patristic and medieval periods, as for example in the works of Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, and Richard of St. Victor.⁵ These writers do not reflect modern interests in the possible implications of trinitarian doctrine for political and economic structures. However, their recognition of Father, Son, and Spirit as distinct centers of knowledge and will demonstrate their linkage to social trinitarian models of the modern era.

In the twentieth century the work of Karl Barth and Karl Rahner sparked a “Trinitarian renaissance” that has continued down to the present.⁶ Systematic theologians, historians of doctrine, biblical scholars, and philosophers of religion continue to give renewed attention to the doctrine of the Trinity—long marginalized or neglected in both academic theology and the life of the churches.⁷ This renewed interest is reflected in the work of modern exponents of the social Trinity such as Leonard Hodgson, David Brown, Cornelius Plantinga, Richard Swinburne, Gordon Lewis and Bruce Demarest, Jürgen

⁵ On Gregory of Nyssa, see Plantinga, “Gregory of Nyssa,” 325–52. For Augustine, see the discussion of William Hasker, *Metaphysics and the Tri-Personal God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 46–47, *De Trinitate* XV.17.28, where Augustine states that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit each has his own distinct awareness of memory, understanding, and love. On Richard of St. Victor, see Lydia Schumacher, “Richard of St. Victor,” in *The History of Scottish Theology, Volume 1: Celtic Origins to Reformed Orthodoxy*, ed. David Fergusson and Mark W. Elliott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 25–38.

⁶ Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of the Word of God*, I/1.9, 348–83, and Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/1; Rahner, *The Trinity*, esp. 103–14, “The Problem of the Concept of ‘Person.’”

⁷ For a survey of recent developments in trinitarian theology, see Fred Sanders, “The Trinity,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, ed. John Webster, Kathryn Tanner, and Ian Torrance (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 35–53. For a review of recent discussions of the Trinity by theologians and philosophers of religion, see *The Trinity: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Trinity*, ed. Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall, and Gerald O’Collins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); *Philosophical and Theological Essays on the Trinity*, ed. Thomas McCall and Michael C. Rea (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); and Thomas H. McCall, *Which Trinity? Whose Monotheism? Philosophical and Systematic Theologians on the Metaphysics of Trinitarian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).

Moltmann, Miroslav Volf, J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, William Hasker, and Stephen Davis.⁸ Social models have been criticized on various grounds, especially in regards to the appearance of tritheism and the possibility of conflict of wills among the trinitarian persons.⁹ These objections are dealt with in section II of this article, where a robust, ontologically grounded framework for the divine unity of being and will is presented.

⁸ Leonard Hodgson, *The Doctrine of the Trinity: Croall Lectures, 1942–1943* (London: Nisbet and Co., 1943); David Brown, *The Divine Trinity* (LaSalle, IL: Open Court Publishing Co., 1985); Plantinga, “Gregory of Nyssa and the Social Analogy of the Trinity,” 325–52, and Plantinga, “The Threeness/Oneness Problem of the Trinity,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 23, no. 1 (1988): 37–53; Richard Swinburne, *The Christian God* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994); Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 272–75; Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1993), 156–57; Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, “Christian Doctrines (I): The Trinity,” in *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview: Faith Seeking Understanding*, 582–95; William Hasker, *Metaphysics and the Tri-Personal God*; and Stephen T. Davis and Eric T. Yang, *An Introduction to Christian Philosophical Theology: Faith Seeking Understanding* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2020) 51–80. Each of these authors presents his own understanding of a social model; there is no one single version of the “social Trinity.” My proposals in this article are indebted to the previous work of Cornelius Plantinga, William Hasker, and Stephen T. Davis, and attempt to extend and strengthen their insights.

⁹ These objections have been forcefully argued, e.g., by Carl Mosser, “Fully Social Trinitarianism,” in *Philosophical and Theological Essays on the Trinity*, 131–50; and by Brian Leftow, “Anti Social Trinitarianism,” in *The Trinity: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Trinity*, 203–50. See also recent criticisms of Stephen R. Holmes, *The Quest for the Trinity: The Doctrine of God in Scripture, History and Modernity* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2012), and Matthew Barrett, *Simply Trinity: The Unmanipulated Father, Son, and Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2021); and the review article of Gijsbert van den Brink, “Social Trinitarianism: A Discussion of Some Recent Theological Criticisms,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 16, no. 3 (2014): 331–50.

I. Perichoresis: From Natures to Consciousness; Gregory of Nyssa's Three-Man Illustration Updated

This section's purpose is twofold: First, to argue that *perichoresis* can be extended from natures—for example, the two natures of Christ—to the states of consciousness of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Second, to illustrate perichoresis of consciousness with a modernized version of Gregory of Nyssa's Peter, James, and John illustration—with a *jazz trio* musical analogy. Taken together, the first and the second strengthen the social model's plausibility and coherence.

The concept of perichoresis was first applied to the two natures of Christ and subsequently to the Trinity.¹⁰ In this article I adopt the definition of perichoresis proposed by the Orthodox theologian Slobodan Stamatović: “the mutual permeation and unity of the different, [e.g., of the divine and human natures of Christ; or of the persons of the Trinity] where the difference remains completely preserved despite the communication of one to the other.”¹¹

This concept (Greek, *perichoresis*; Latin, *circumincessio*) was recognized by both Eastern and Latin fathers, and is based especially on Johannine statements such as John 14:10. In response to Philip's request to “show us the Father” (John 14:8), Jesus says, “Don't you believe that I am *in* the Father, and that the Father is *in* me?” (emphasis added). Here the preposition “in” (*en*) evidently has the sense not of the containment of one physical object within another,

¹⁰ Cf. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Epistle 101*, in *The Library of Christian Classics, vol. III: Christology of the Later Fathers*, ed. Edward Rochie Hardy (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954), 219, 87C; Maximus the Confessor, *Quaest. Ad Thalass.* 59, 202B, cited in Danut Manastireanu, “Perichoresis and the Early Christian Doctrine of God,” *Studia Archaeus* 11–12 (2007–2008): 61–93, at 65–70. On the development of the concept of *perichoresis* see further: G. L. Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought* (London: SPCK, 1964), 282–302; Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 175–202; Michael G. Lawler, “Perichoresis: New Theological Wine in an Old Theological Wineskin,” *Horizons* 22, no. 1 (1995): 49–66; and Verna Harrison, “Perichoresis in the Greek Fathers,” *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 35, no. 1 (1991): 53–65.

¹¹ Slobodan Stamatović, “The Meaning of Perichoresis,” *Open Theology* 2, no. 1 (2016): 303–23, esp. 321.

but rather of an intimate union of the Son's and Father's inner life, where the personal distinctions and identities of each is preserved.

Because of this intimate perichoretic communion and sharing of life between Father and Son, Jesus could say to Philip, "If you really knew *me*, you would know my *Father* as well" (John 14:7, emphasis added). This perichoretic union is the basis upon which Jesus says that "Anyone who has seen *me* has seen the *Father*" (John 14:9, emphasis added).

Similarly, this perichoretic intimacy uniting Father and Son is the basis upon which Jesus says that both his words and miracles are not just his own but are those of the Father who is "living in me" (John 14:10b, 11). Jesus the Son fully shares the inner life of the Father, and the Father fully shares his inner life with his eternal and incarnate Son.

As noted above, the concept of perichoresis was first applied to the two natures of Christ. In the classic definition of Chalcedon (451), the Lord Jesus Christ is declared to be "perfect (*teleion*) in divinity (*theoteiti*) and perfect in humanity (*anthropoteiti*) ... truly God (*theon aleithos*) and truly man (*anthropon aleithos*)." Jesus Christ is acknowledged in two natures (*en duo phusesin*) "without confusion (*asugkutos*), without change (*atreptos*), without division (*adiaretos*), without separation (*akoristos*)."¹² Even though the technical term "perichoresis" is not used, the concept is clearly present, being expressed in the four *without*s. The divine and human natures of Christ were joined in an intimate and ineffable union in the Incarnation. The two natures reciprocally permeated each other, with the unique properties of both natures being preserved—without confusion, division, separation, or loss of identity.

There is a long tradition in Christian theology of seeking in the material world illustrations and analogies for spiritual truths.¹³ A favorite analogy among the church fathers for perichoresis and the interpermeation of the two natures of Christ was that of an iron

¹² "Council of Chalcedon—451," in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 1, *Nicaea I to Lateran V*, ed. Norman P. Tanner (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1990) 86.

¹³ E.g., my article, "Lessons from the Proton for Trinitarian Theology? Three Quarks in One Proton," *Science and Christian Belief* 34, no. 2 (2022): 130–41, I have discussed the tradition in patristic and later theology of finding signs of the Trinity (*vestigium trinitatis*) in the natural order.

poker in a fireplace hot with burning coals.¹⁴ The iron is in the fire, and the fire is in the glowing iron, and yet both iron and fire remain distinct with their respective properties being preserved. The iron is still iron, and the fire is still fire. In the case of the two natures of Christ, the divine nature permeates the human nature, but without confusion. The human nature remains human and the divine nature remains divine.

We now return to the argument for the extension of the concept of perichoresis from perichoresis of natures to perichoresis of states of personal consciousness. Can the states of consciousness of Father, Son, and Spirit permeate one another, while remaining distinct? Can the Father and Son know the other intimately as a Thou while retaining their own sense of being an I?¹⁵ Is there New Testament textual evidence that this is the case not only in the economic Trinitarian relations of Father and Son, but also in the immanent Trinity?

As we have already seen in the texts of John 14:10; 14:9; 14:7; and 14:11, Jesus knew that the Father was in him and revealing his mind and will to him. This was true throughout his earthly ministry. At his baptism, Jesus heard the voice of the Father, declaring, “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased” (Mark 1:11). The Father also poured his love into his Son’s heart by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 5:5). Jesus knew the Father as distinct from himself, knew himself as distinct from the Father. At the same time, he knew the love that intimately united them.

On the Mount of Transfiguration Jesus again, in the presence of Peter, James, and John, heard his Father’s affirmation of his unique sonship and beloved status: “This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!” (Mark 9:7). The Father’s affection for his Son was felt in Jesus’ heart. Jesus knew he was hearing the Father’s words—not words from his own mind. The bright cloud surrounding Jesus and the

¹⁴ John of Damascus uses this illustration in *De fide orthodoxa* I.61.1. ; cited in Stamatović, “The Meaning of Perichoresis,” 303–23, esp. 315.

¹⁵ The concept of I–Thou consciousness among Father, Son, and Spirit has also been argued by the Romanian Orthodox theologian Dumitru Staniloae, who speaks of “a compenetration of consciousness” and “intersubjectivity” among the three: Dumitru Staniloae, *The Experience of God*, trans. Ioan Ionita and Robert Barringer (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1994), 260–61, 270.

disciples (Luke 9:28–36) visibly manifested the Holy Spirit, as did the dove at his baptism, imparting God’s love into Jesus’ heart. The brilliant light transfiguring Jesus’ body and clothing revealed Jesus’ divine nature and the glory that he had with the Father before the world began (John 17:5). Seeing Jesus’ divine glory made a lasting impression on both Peter (2 Peter 1:16–18) and John (John 1:14, “We have seen his glory”).

John 12 presents another externally witnessed event in which the Father speaks into the mind and heart of Jesus. After the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Jesus declares, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified” (John 12:23). He prays, “Father, glorify your name!” (John 12:28). The Father’s voice comes from heaven, saying, “I have glorified it, and will glorify it again” (John 12:28). The crowds hear the voice (John 12:29). Jesus has glorified the Father in his obedience in all of life, and now will glorify the Father in his obedience unto death (Phil. 2:8). This publicly witnessed interchange between Jesus and the Father was an example of their perichoretic unity. The Father imparted his thoughts into the mind of Jesus, while both Jesus and his Father retained awareness of their distinct identities. They were united in their knowledge of Jesus’ impending death, and united in a common purpose—that Jesus would die for the sins of the world.

John’s gospel indicates that Jesus heard his Father’s words in private as well as in public settings. Jesus told those who criticized him for his healing the invalid at the Pool of Bethesda on the Sabbath, “My Father is always at work to this very day, and I too am working” (John 5:17). Jesus was spiritually aware of his Father’s invisible but very real work, that is, of the Father’s miraculous healing actions. Jesus did not act independently, but only in partnership with the Father, as he spiritually saw what the Father was doing in any situation (John 5:19). The Father revealed what he was doing to Jesus his Son, because the Father “loves the Son and shows him all he does” (John 5:20). Jesus knew what the Father was doing and he knew that the Father loved him with a deep “Abba” love. He knew that the Father was both united to him and a personal agent distinct from him. Jesus knew that he was not acting on his own authority, but only on the basis of what he heard from the Father (John 5:30).

This perichoretic communication between Jesus and the Father is evident in John 8, where Jesus defended the validity of his claim to be “the light of the world” (John 8:12) in the face of criticism from some Pharisees. Jesus knew he was not alone. He knew the Father was present with him, and that the Father had sent him (John 8:16: “I stand with the Father, who sent me”). The words that he spoke were only those he heard from the Father (John 8:26) and those the Father taught him (John 8:28). Jesus was aware of both the unity and the distinction of the Father’s words and his own words. He owned the Father’s words as his own, but knew that they originated not from himself but from the Father. His testimony was based on what he had “seen in the Father’s presence” (John 8:38).

This perichoretic unity of the Father and the Son, a deep personal unity of reciprocally shared interior life, is true not only in the economy, but also in the immanent Trinity.¹⁶ Here the New Testament textual evidence is not as abundant, but neither is it entirely lacking.¹⁷

In his High Priestly Prayer in the seventeenth chapter, Jesus spoke to his Father, reporting that he glorified him by completing the work the Father had given him to do (v. 4). He then prayed, “And now, Father, glorify me in your presence *with the glory that I had with you before the world began*” (v. 5, emphasis added). Two points should be noticed here. First, there is a clear distinction between the persons

¹⁶ Carl Mosser has criticized some social trinitarians for a citing of New Testament texts that too easily transfers texts on the distinct roles of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit into “direct descriptions of their immanent relations,” collapsing the distinction between the economic and immanent Trinities: see Mosser, “Fully Social Trinitarianism,” 147. This article attempts to carefully distinguish texts revealing the *human* consciousness of Jesus, such as the cry of dereliction on the cross (Matt. 27:46, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken *me?*” [emphasis added]), from those revealing Jesus’ consciousness and memory of his pre-existent state (e.g., John 17:5 and 17:24).

¹⁷ For previous discussions of relevant New Testament texts, see Thomas H. McCall, “Relational Trinity: Creedal Perspective,” in *Two Views on the Doctrine of the Trinity*, ed. Jason S. Sexton (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2014), 113–37, esp. 117–20; Allan Coppedge, *The God Who Is Triune: Revisioning the Doctrine of God* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2007), 26–33; and Royce Gordon Gruenler, *The Trinity in the Gospel of John: A Thematic Commentary on the Fourth Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1986).

of the Father and of the Son, indicated by the use of the personal pronouns I and You. Jesus was not speaking to himself, but to his Father. The personal pronouns indicate a clear distinction in Jesus' mind between the first and second persons of the Trinity. Second, in recalling the glory that he had with the Father *before the world began*, Jesus recalled a distinct memory: the glory he had with the Father as pre-existent Son in the immanent Trinity. Memory is a basic element for personal awareness and identity. Jesus' human consciousness, embedded in the divine nature and person of the Logos, reached back into eternity. It revealed his knowledge of his distinct, unseparated relationship with his Father as pre-existent, divine Son, sharing his Father's glory.

Jesus' memory of his pre-incarnate glory is further explicated in verse 24: "Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory." Jesus knows that the Father has given him glory because the Father loved him before the creation of the world (v. 24b). Historically, it has usually been thought that the answer to Jesus' prayer that believers would be in the presence of Christ, seeing his glory—that is, the beatific vision—would only be experienced after death, in the life to come. However, given the reality of the realized eschatology of the New Covenant (the "already and not yet"), both Paul and the author of Hebrews teach that this vision of the Son's glory can begin in this life, as a consequence of Jesus' exaltation and the coming of the Spirit. Paul teaches that believers are now seated with Christ in the heavenly places (Eph. 2:6). In the Spirit believers, with unveiled faces, are contemplating or reflecting the Lord's glory, and are being transformed into his likeness, with ever-increasing glory (2 Cor. 3:18). God has already caused his light to shine in the believer's heart to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ (2 Cor. 4:6). The author of Hebrews teaches that in true worship, believers have come¹⁸ to the heavenly Zion and are now in the presence of Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant (Heb. 12:22, 24).

As in verse 5, here in verse 24 of the High Priestly Prayer, Jesus' memory extends back into his pre-incarnate state as beloved Son of

¹⁸ The verb used here (*proserchomai*, "come, approach, draw near") is in the perfect tense, indicating a completed action in the past with continuing effects in the present.

the Father. He knew that *you* (the Father) loved *me* (the Son) *before the creation of the world*. The personal pronouns clearly indicate the personal distinctions of Father and Son in the immanent Trinity. Jesus knew this distinction in unity, a distinction without separation or confusion.

These texts in Jesus' High Priestly Prayer are not, of course, the first references to the immanent Trinity in John's gospel. The opening verses of the prologue reveal both the existence of the first and second persons of the Godhead, and their equality and distinction. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God (*kai ho logos hen pros ton theon*), and the Word was God (*kai theos hen ho logos*: John 1:1, 2). The *logos* or Word is the Revealer of God's wisdom and creative power, variously attested in the Old Testament, and now revealed in Jesus as the incarnate Son.¹⁹

The words *kai theos hen ho logos* have generated enormous exegetical debate, especially in relation to the deity of Christ, from the time of the Arian controversy down to the present. *Theos*, here without the definite article, is technically best understood as an anarthrous (without the definite article), pre-verbal (placed before the verb *hen*, was), predicate nominative (God, the predicate nominative; referring to Logos, the subject). The word *theos* has a qualitative sense, meaning that the Word had all the qualities and attributes of the God of verse 1:1b.²⁰

The most straightforward translation of the text is "and the Word was God." The Word—the eternal Son, the co-equal second person of the immanent Trinity—shares the essence of the Father, at the same time being distinct in person.²¹ If John had written *kai ho logos hen ho theos*—with both *theos* and *logos* having the definite article, and *theos* following the verb rather than preceding it—then the Word and

¹⁹ Cf. Raymond E. Brown, *The Anchor Bible*, vol. 29, *The Gospel According to John*, vol. 1 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 524; Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 72–79.

²⁰ For extensive and detailed exegetical analysis of this text, together with discussion of Colwell's Rule on the definite article, and subsequent discussion by Harner, see Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 1996), 256–69; summarized on 269.

²¹ Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 269.

God would be interchangeable,²² and the text would have asserted modalism—erasing the personal distinctions of Father and Son. The text asserts both the full deity of the Son, and the Son’s distinction from the person of the Father, thus excluding both Arianism and modalism. In sum, John 1:1 reveals the Word as a co-equal, co-eternal second Person of the immanent Trinity, fully sharing the divine essence of God the Father, yet being eternally distinct in person. As Logos and Revealer of God’s wisdom, the Son, like the Father, is a conscious, personal being, fully possessing the attributes of knowledge, memory, and will.

Two other Johannine texts, John 3:13 and John 16:28, reveal Jesus’ memory of the pre-existent state and distinction from and relationship with the Father. He says to Nicodemus, “No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man” (3:13). Jesus remembers that *he came from heaven* and existed with the Father as Son of God in heaven before becoming incarnate. Before his High Priestly Prayer, Jesus tells the disciples “I came from the Father and entered the world; now I am leaving the world and going back to the Father” (16:28). He remembers that he *came from the Father* before he *entered the world*. Both texts reveal Jesus’ awareness of his identity as divine Son in the immanent Trinity, before entering the world as incarnate Son in the economic Trinity.

References to the immanent Trinity, with indications of distinction of Persons, are found in the writings of Paul as well as in John.²³ Notable is the famous “Christ Hymn,” Phil. 2:5–11. Paul urges his readers to imitate the humility of the pre-existent Christ, laying aside his divine glory and assuming humanity as an obedient servant. The believer’s attitude, Paul writes, should be the same as that of Christ Jesus, “Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with

²² Philip B. Harner, “Qualitative Anarthrous Predicate Nouns: Mark 15:39 and John 1:1,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 92, no. 1 (1973): 75–87, esp. 84.

²³ As Gordon Fee has observed, “That Paul’s understanding of God was functionally Trinitarian and that the distinction between Father, Son, and Spirit were presuppositional for him can be demonstrated from two sets of materials: several explicitly Trinitarian texts (2 Cor. 13:13[14]; 1 Cor. 12:4–6; Eph. 4:4–6) and the many soteriological texts that are expressed in Trinitarian terms.” Gordon D. Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA : Hendrickson, 1994), 839.

God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness” (vv. 6, 7).²⁴

The word *hegesato* (“consider”) in verse 6 deserves closer attention. *Hegesato*, here the aorist middle indicative of *hegeomai*, “to consider,” is also used by Paul in verse 3, where he exhorts the Philippians in humility to consider others better than themselves—to imitate the disposition from which Christ’s self-humiliation proceeded. According to Vincent, *hegeomai* implies a “conscious ... sure judgment, resting on ... careful weighing of the facts.”²⁵ In verse 6 the apostle teaches that Christ, in his pre-existent state, as divine Son and second person of the immanent Trinity *considered*, that is, had a conscious awareness of his equality with God and yet, in a free and conscious decision, chose not to hold onto or retain the outward manifestation of his divine glory, and to assume the human form of a servant during the economy.

Consequently, we have in Philippians 2:6–7 clear indications of both the equality in nature of the Father and pre-incarnate Son, together with the distinction of persons. The text refers to Christ’s consciousness and will (“did not *consider* ... rather, he *made himself* nothing”

²⁴ NIV translation. It is beyond the purpose of this contribution to discuss the complex exegetical debates concerning the terms *en morphe theou* (“in the form of God”) and *harpagmon* (“robbery”? “usurpation”? “thing to be grasped”? “seized”? “retained”?) in v. 6. For extensive review and discussion of modern scholarship on this text, see Gordon D. Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 202–12; and Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Philippians*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 43 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983), 81–88. See also Moisés Silva, *Philippians*, Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1988), 112–26, and Ralph P. Martin, *A Hymn of Christ: Philippians 2:5–11 in Recent Interpretation and in the Setting of Early Christian Worship* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1997), 134–64. I follow those scholars who understand the sense of *en morphe theou* to be “in very nature God,” and *harpagmon* in the sense of “retained,” that is, in the sense of Christ not retaining the privilege of his pre-incarnate divine glory, but in humility being willing to surrender it in the Incarnation by taking the form of a servant.

²⁵ Marvin R. Vincent, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles to the Philippians and to Philemon*, International Critical Commentary, vol. 35 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1955), 56.

[emphasis added]) in his pre-existent state. Philippians 2:6–7 is consistent with a social model of the Trinity.²⁶

First Corinthians 2:6–16 is another Pauline text referring to the immanent Trinity. Paul speaks of a secret wisdom from God, that God the Father “destined for our glory *before time began*” (v. 7, emphasis added). “Before time began” points to the Father’s decision in eternity to reveal the secret wisdom in time. This secret wisdom is the gospel of the crucified “Lord of glory” (v. 8)—God’s Son, now revealed by the Spirit (v. 10). Thus, all three persons of the Trinity were involved in the revelation of this gospel wisdom not understood by the rulers of this age (v. 8).

Verses 10–12 speak of the personal interactions of God the Father and the Holy Spirit in this process of revelation. These verses indicate both the personal distinctions of Father and Spirit, and their distinct states of consciousness. The Father has revealed this secret wisdom by his Spirit (v. 10a). The Spirit searches (*erauna*: present active indicative; “to search, to penetrate, to examine, to investigate”) the deep things of God (v. 10b). The verb *erauna* indicates the Spirit’s conscious, continuing probing of God the Father’s divine essence.²⁷ The Spirit is a distinct person who knows the mind of God the Father (v. 11).²⁸ The Father is a distinct person who has prepared and predestined the revelation (v. 7). The Father’s mind is known to the mind of the Spirit. First Corinthians 2:11—the Spirit knows the mind of God—is consistent with Romans 8:27: the Father knows the mind of the Spirit. “The Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God”

²⁶ Silva has observed that while this passage (Phil. 2:5–11) may not have been written for the primary purpose of presenting an ontological description of Christ, it is nonetheless “very much consonant with the trinitarian formulas of the fourth-century church.” *Philippians*, 116.

²⁷ Fritz Rienecker and Cleon L. Rogers, *A Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament: A Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament*, vol. 2, *Romans-Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980), 391: “The present tense [of *erauna*] indicates that which is always true.”

²⁸ On the biblical evidence for the distinct personhood of the Holy Spirit, see further John Jefferson Davis, “Is the Holy Spirit Really a ‘Person’—with a Distinct Personality?” *Themelios* 17, no. 3 (2022): 550–58, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/is-the-holy-spirit-really-a-person-with-a-distinct-personality/>.

(the Father). The Spirit and the Father are distinct persons, but fully united in knowledge and will.

The Holy Spirit's distinct personhood is attested by other texts. Only the Spirit can inspire a true confession of "Jesus is Lord" (1 Cor. 12:3). The Spirit distributes spiritual gifts as he determines (1 Cor. 12:11). The Holy Spirit can be grieved (Eph. 4:30). The Holy Spirit can be lied to (Acts 5:3). The Holy Spirit spoke and called Paul and Barnabas as missionaries and sent them on their way (Acts 13:2, 4).

Evidence of perichoresis among states of consciousness of Father, Son, and Spirit are also found in Johannine texts such as John 16:13–15. Jesus tells the disciples that when the Spirit comes, as promised earlier in 14:16, the Spirit will guide them "into all the truth" (v. 13a). The Spirit will not speak independently on his own initiative. "He will speak *only what he hears* (13b, emphasis added)—from the Father and the Son. All the Father has belongs to the Son. The Spirit will take what belongs to the Son and make it known to the disciples (16:15). The Spirit knows he is the Spirit in distinction from the Father. He knows that the words he gives the disciples are those of the Father and the Son. The Spirit is aware both of his own mind and the minds of the Father and the Son. These Johannine and Pauline texts are consistent with a social model of the Trinity. Father, Son, and Spirit have distinct but not separated conscious states of knowledge and will.

Next, consider Gregory of Nyssa's Peter, James, and John illustration for the Trinity. Its limitations will be noted, especially in terms of its suggesting tritheism. A modernized version—a jazz trio analogy—will be proposed, showing how three musicians can play and enjoy the same piece of music, and at the same time be aware of their own distinct parts. How this illustration could preserve the fundamental oneness of the three will be addressed below. A subsequent section will examine Gregory of Nazianzus's three suns illustration, together with the concept of reciprocally and congruently nested hypostases or persons.

The jazz trio is a modernized version of Gregory of Nyssa's Peter, James, and John analogy in his "On 'Not Three Gods'"²⁹ Gregory first suggests an example of many coins [staters], each made of the

²⁹ The full name of this brief treatise on the Trinity, written ca. 375–381 to Ablabius, a fellow ecclesiastic, is "An Answer to Ablabius: That We Should Not Think of Saying There Are Three Gods" (referenced in n. 30 below).

same gold, before speaking of Peter, James, and John KM: the (per NIV)?—three individuals who share a common humanity:

We say of gold, when it is made into small coins, that it is one and it is spoken of as such.... We find no multiplication of the nature of gold by reason of the numbers of staters [coins] ... As, then, there may be many golden staters [coins], but gold is one, so may we be confronted with many who individually share in human nature, such as Peter, James, and John, yet the “man” [the human nature] in them is one.³⁰

Gregory recognizes that no analogy for the Trinity can be fully adequate, but the comparison he wishes to suggest to Ablabius is clear enough. Just as three individual gold coins share the common nature of gold, and Peter, James, and John share a common human nature,³¹ so also Father, Son, and Holy Spirit share a common divine nature.

Admittedly, Gregory’s Peter, James, and John illustration does not adequately answer the question, “Why not three gods?”³² His image of three individuals not related by perichoresis would appear to illustrate tritheism rather than orthodox Trinitarianism. The illustration recognizes that the Trinity is one in respect of nature and three in respect of person, but does not convincingly answer the question of

³⁰ Gregory of Nyssa, “On ‘Not Three Gods,’” in *Christology of the Later Fathers*, vol. 3 of *Library of Christian Classics*, ed. Edward R. Hardie and Cyril C. Richardson (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954), 265.

³¹ A Platonic background to Gregory’s statement would make it plausible that Peter, James, and John are thought to be instances of the one ideal human being.

³² Centuries later John of Damascus offered a similar three-person analogy: Adam, Eve, and Seth. “Thus ... Adam is unbegotten, because he was formed by God, while Seth is begotten, because he is the son of Adam; Eve, too, was not begotten, because she was produced from the rib of Adam. Yet, they do not differ in nature, because they are all human beings; they only differ in the manner of their existence.” “The Orthodox Faith” I.8, in *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 37, *Writings*, trans. Frederic H. Chase (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1958), 181. Similarly, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit share a common divine essence, but are distinguished as persons by their manner of origin (unbegotten, begotten, proceeding).

why three individuals, each sharing fully the one divine essence, do not constitute three gods.

By incorporating the concept of perichoresis, the jazz trio analogy better reflects both the oneness (unity) and threeness (distinctions) of the Trinity. Consider the trio—the pianist, the drummer, and the bass player playing a favorite piece—“Softly.”³³ Their experience has a perichoretic quality: sharing the same experience but preserving their distinctive musical parts. The pianist is feeling the sounds and rhythms of the piano, but the piano’s sounds are being felt by the drummer and the bass player at the same time. All three are “into” the music—their own musical lines, those of the other two, into the music as a whole—and the music is “into” them. The three are in musical *communion* with one another. They are “in” one another as each shares distinct musical feelings. Their sharing is simultaneous and multilayered, combining elements of cognition, emotion, and volition.³⁴

Admittedly, this illustration does not provide a metaphysical basis for the unity of the musicians. Could not the jazz trio fall apart? Critics of the social Trinity such as Stephen Layman have asked, “What ... holds the divine Persons together? Is God, on the Social view, no more permanent than the average committee?”³⁵ An appeal to perichoresis alone is not sufficient.³⁶ The following section develops a

³³ Pascal Wintz Trio, “Softly, as in a Morning Sunrise,” video, 3:31,” accessed May 19, 2023, <https://youtu.be/cEhwKx80C90>.

³⁴ I believe that this jazz trio analogy, in which each of the three persons is simultaneously aware not only of his own musical consciousness but also of the other two, shows that it is not necessary to appeal, as does William Hasker, to split-brain or multiple personality disorder analogies to conceptualize a Trinitarian perichoresis of consciousness: see William Hasker, “How to Think about the Trinity,” in *Christian Philosophy of Religion: Essays in Honor of Stephen T. Davis*, ed. C. P. Ruloff (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015), 105–27, esp. 117–19. I am generally very supportive of Hasker’s work on the social Trinity, especially his *Metaphysics and the Tri-Personal God*.

³⁵ C. Stephen Layman, “Tritheism and the Trinity,” *Faith and Philosophy* 5, no. 3 (1988): 291–98, esp. 297.

³⁶ As Randall Otto has observed, “Perichoresis demands an ontological basis for relations if there is to be a *real* and not merely *conceptual* relationship.... Any use of perichoresis apart from the essential unity of divine nature

more robust framework for an ontologically grounded unity of will and action among Father, Son, and Spirit in the social Trinity. The argument proposes a modernized version of Gregory of Nazianzus's three suns illustration, together with the conceptual apparatus of *nested* relations. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are conceptualized as reciprocally, congruently, and necessarily nested persons, subsisting in the one undivided divine essence, as explained below.

Perichoresis Ontologically Grounded; Gregory of Nazianzus's "Three Suns" Illustration Updated

Before considering a modernized version of Gregory of Nazianzus's three suns illustration, a definition of the nested relations is in order.³⁷ A nested relation obtains when one or more things are contained in another thing so as to constitute a larger, integrated whole. For example, the three branches of the American federal government—the executive, the legislative, and the judicial—are organically connected and nested within one larger, distinctive whole: the federal government. The baby Jesus was nested in the womb of the Virgin Mary to constitute a distinctive, larger whole, the Theotokos or "God-bearer." In the case of the Trinity, Father, Son, and Spirit are reciprocally nested within one another, and within the one undivided

is vacuous": Randall E. Otto, "The Use and Abuse of Perichoresis in Recent Theology," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 54, no. 3 (2001): 366–84, esp. 368, 377 (emphasis original). Otto faults Jürgen Moltmann's use of perichoresis in his version of the social Trinity in *The Trinity and the Kingdom* on this basis, i.e., the lack of an ontological basis for his use of the concept: 374, 376–77. This observation that perichoresis must be ontologically grounded is shared by Wolfhart Pannenberg: "Perichoresis presupposes another basis of the unity of the three persons. It can only manifest this [otherwise grounded] unity": *Systematic Theology*, Volume 1, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 334. The present article presents such an ontological basis: the fully congruent, fully reciprocal, and metaphysically necessary *nested relations* of Father, Son, and Spirit.

³⁷ See John Jefferson Davis, "Chalcedon Contemporized: Jesus as Fully Person—without Nestorianism; the Hypostatic Union as Nested Relation," *Philosophia Christi* 22, no. 2 (2020): 269–84, at 270–71, for a definition and examples of nested relations.

divine essence, to constitute an inclusive whole: the one, unique, undivided Trinity.

These examples illustrate three features characteristic of nested relations: (1) a strong, integral connection of the parts; (2) some hierarchical or functional relation of the parts; and (3) an identity-conferring relationship between the parts, and between the parts and the whole.³⁸ For example, in the case of the baby Jesus in the womb of the Virgin Mary, Jesus is not just any first-century Jew with the name of Jesus, but the specific Jesus who was in the womb of the *Virgin Mary*. Mary was not just one of many women in first-century Israel with the name of Mary, but the unique Mary the mother of Jesus, the Son of God. The new inclusive reality they constituted in this nested relation was not just “a pregnant Mary,” but the unique Theotokos, Mary the “Mother of God.” The parts and the whole were reciprocally identity-conferring.

On the other hand, a stock example from the history of philosophy, “Socrates sitting in a chair,”³⁹ exemplifies not a nested relation, but only an accidental unity of two disparate things. The relationship between Socrates and the chair is temporary and accidental, a relation ending when Socrates walks away. There is no strong, integral relation between the two, and neither the chair nor Socrates is integral to the identity of the other.

The concept of *nested relations* has precursors in the fields of developmental psychology, biology, and environmental studies. In his study of individuals in their social contexts, Urie Bronfenbrenner posited “a nested arrangement of structures, each contained within the next”: The child is nested within the nuclear family; the nuclear family within the extended family or tribe; the tribe within the culture

³⁸ These features have been adapted from N. Rescher and P. Oppenheim, “Logical Analysis of Gestalt Concepts,” *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 6 (1955): 89–106, esp. 90: “(i): The whole must possess some attribute in virtue of its status as a whole ... some attribute peculiar to it ... as a whole. (ii) The parts of the whole must stand in some special and characteristic relation of dependence with one another ... (iii) The whole must possess some kind of structure, in virtue of which certain specifically structural characteristics pertain to it.”

³⁹ Aristotle, *Topics* I.7 103a23–31.

and nation; the nation within a global system.⁴⁰ In biology, Cecie Starr and Ralph Taggart posited hierarchical relations between cells, organs, organism, population groups, and ecosystems.⁴¹

The concept of a nested relation has not been extensively developed in the field of mereology—the study of whole–part relations—in either the modern or premodern periods.⁴² However, the concept of a nested relation, of one thing contained within another, is present in both Latin and Eastern patristic treatises on the Trinity. Augustine stated with respect to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, “one is as much as the three together ... *each are in each, and all in each, and each in all.*”⁴³ For Hilary, the Persons of the Trinity “reciprocally contain one another, so that one should permanently envelop, and also be permanently enveloped by the other.”⁴⁴ John of Damascus spoke of the Persons “abiding and resting in one another,” inasmuch as “the Son is in the Father and the Spirit, and the Spirit is in the Father and the Son, and the Father is in the Son and the Spirit.”⁴⁵ While these patristic authors do not employ the technical terminology of nested relation, the basic concept is clearly present.

The decree on the Trinity by the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) proclaimed that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are the one “supreme reality ... the three persons together, and each one of them separately.” Therefore, in God “there is only a Trinity, not a quaternity,

⁴⁰ Urie Bronfenbrenner, *The Ecology of Human Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 22.

⁴¹ Cecie Starr and Ralph Taggart, *Biology: The Unity and Diversity of Life*, 4th ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1984), 6.

⁴² For a concise overview of the history of the discipline of mereology, see Achille Varzi, “Mereology,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2019), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2019/entries/mereology>. For the medieval period, see Andrew Arlig, “Medieval Mereology,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2023/entries/mereology-medieval/>. For modern developments, see Peter Simons, *Parts: A Study in Ontology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), and N. Rescher and P. Oppenheim, “Logical Analysis of Gestalt Concepts.”

⁴³ Augustine, *De Trinitate* VI.10.12 (emphasis added).

⁴⁴ Hilary, *De Trinitate* III.1.

⁴⁵ John of Damascus, *De fide orthodoxa* I.14.11–18.

since each of the three persons is that reality.”⁴⁶ These patristic and conciliar statements are saying, in effect, that the divine persons are reciprocally and congruently nested in one another, to constitute the one God, who is the “supreme reality.”

The notion of nested relations also applies to the mental states of Father, Son, and Spirit. Their mental states interpenetrate one another through perichoresis—the intimate union of things that are different, while remaining distinct in the union. Gregory of Nazianzus’s *Epistle 101*, written to Cledonius against Apollinaris, around the year 382 or 383, contains a crucial insight: nonmaterial things (such as Father, Son, and Spirit) can occupy the same space and permeate one another while preserving their respective identities. Gregory is correcting the error of Apollinaris, who compromised the humanity of Christ by teaching that the Godhead took the place of the human intellect. Gregory stated:

But, says such a one [Apollinaris], the Godhead took the place of the human intellect. How does this touch me? ... Keep ... the whole man, and mingle Godhead therewith, that you may benefit me in my completeness. But, he asserts, he [Christ] could not contain two perfect [natures]. Not only if you look at him in a bodily fashion. For a bushel measure will not hold two bushels, nor will the space of one body hold two or more bodies. *But if you will look at what is mental and incorporeal, remember that I in my one personality can contain soul and reason and mind and the Holy Spirit.... For such is the nature of intellectual existences, that they can mingle with one another and with bodies, incorporeally and invisibly. For many sounds are comprehended by one ear ... nor are the senses narrowed by each other, or crowded out.*⁴⁷

⁴⁶ “Fourth Lateran Council—1215,” in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 1, *Nicaea I to Lateran V*, ed. Norman P. Tanner (London: Sheed & Ward, 1990), 232. This statement seems equivalent to Augustine’s assertion that with respect to Father, Son, and Spirit “one is as much as the three together ... each in each and all in each”: *De Trinitate* VI.10.12. One is “as much as the three together” because the three are in fact nested reciprocally and congruently together to form one supreme inclusive reality—the Holy Trinity.

⁴⁷ Gregory of Nazianzus, “Epistle 101,” in *Christology of the Later Fathers*, vol. 3 of *Library of Christian Classics*, ed. Edward Rochie Hardy (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954), 215–24, esp. 219 (emphasis added).

Gregory's understanding of perichoresis is relevant for a social model of the Trinity. "Intellectual existences" or minds, he says, "can mingle with one another," while still retaining their distinctiveness. In the jazz trio analogy, the distinct sounds of the piano, bass, and drums "mingle with one another," but are distinguished by each musician.

Analogously, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are aware of the minds of the other two, while still aware of their own. Perichoresis applies not only to the two natures of Christ, but also to the persons of the Trinity and their states of self-and-other awareness.

Next, consider Gregory of Nazianzus's three suns illustration.⁴⁸ Three distinct suns are superimposed to form one circle of light. Gregory, who served for a relatively brief period of two years (380–81) as the Archbishop of Constantinople, came to be recognized as one of the great teachers and preachers of the fourth century. Gregory was a major defender of Nicene orthodoxy and developer of trinitarian doctrine. His series of lectures, the *Theological Orations*, given in Constantinople ca. 380, won for him in later ages the title of *Theologos* ("Theologian"), a title otherwise only accorded to Saint John, the apostle and beloved disciple.

In the "Fifth Theological Oration" Gregory used his famous analogy to illustrate the truth that the Trinity, viewed under different aspects, is both one and three:

To us there is one God, for the Godhead is one ... We believe in three Persons ... One is not more and another less God ... nor are they divided in will or parted in power ... but the Godhead is, to speak concisely, undivided in separate Persons; and there is one mingling of lights, as it were of three suns joined to each other. When, then, we look at the Godhead ... that which we conceive is one; but when we look at the Persons in whom the Godhead dwells, and at those who timelessly and with equal glory have their being from the first cause, there are three whom we worship.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ For the following see John Jefferson Davis, "Updating Cappadocian Answers to the One and Threeness Problem of the Trinity: With Analogies from Modern Physics," *Doom Theological Journal* 19, nos. 1–2 (2022): 5–25, esp. 11–13.

⁴⁹ Gregory of Nazianzus, "Fifth Theological Oration 14," in *Christology of the Later Fathers*, vol. 3 of *Library of Christian Classics*, ed. Edward Rochie Hardy (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954), 202.

Gregory's analogy can be updated with modern knowledge of the properties of red, green, and blue wavelengths of light.⁵⁰ In this updated analogy Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are represented in Venn-diagram fashion as three overlapping circles of equal diameter⁵¹ in primary colors—the Father blue, the Son red, and the Holy Spirit green.

At the start, the circles are viewed as partially overlapping, with the common area of intersection colored in white—the color resulting from the superimposition of the blue, red, and green lights. The circles then move inward, converging at the center, with all three superimposed congruently on one another. The blue circle is nested within the red, the red within the blue, the red within the green, the green within the red, and so forth, for all three circles. When all three circles are superimposed at the center, only one circle of white light is visible. White symbolizes the divine essence shared equally and fully by all three. The blue, red, and green light wavelengths of the three are still present and distinct, yet appear as one bright white light when the three stand superimposed as congruently nested

⁵⁰ Interestingly, an illustration of this type was anticipated by another Cappadocian father, who saw in a rainbow that refracted a single beam of sunlight into colors of blue, red, and emerald an analogy for the Trinity: “Epistle 38: To His Brother Gregory, Concerning the Difference between *Ousia* and *Hypostasis*,” in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd ser., vol. 8, *Basil: Letters and Selected Works*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999; orig. 1895), 137–41, esp. 139–40. Traditionally, this epistle has been attributed to Basil of Caesarea, but some modern scholars attribute it to Gregory of Nyssa: see the review of recent scholarship by J. Zachhuber, “Again: The 38th Letter of Basil of Caesarea as the Work of Gregory of Nyssa,” *Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum* 7, no. 1 (2003): 73–90.

⁵¹ The illustration of the Trinity as three overlapping and converging circles was proposed earlier by Stephen T. Davis in his paper “Perichoretic Monotheism,” presented at a 2001 conference, later published in *The Trinity: East/West Dialogue*, ed. Melville Y. Stewart (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 2003), 35–50. See also his more recent presentation of “perichoretic monotheism” in Davis and Yang, *An Introduction to Christian Philosophical Theology*, 65–73. This contribution strengthens Davis’s argument with the concept of fully reciprocal, fully congruent *nested* relations, providing a stronger, ontologically grounded basis for the unity and agreement of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

circles.⁵² The circles are visible as one; yet simultaneously, three are still present, and can be counted as three. The three share a common “substance” (light; electromagnetic radiation) yet are distinguished by distinctive properties (wavelengths of red, blue, and green light). In the superimposed state the distinct colors of red, blue, and green are *ontologically* present but not *phenomenologically* apparent. The distinctive wavelengths of the colors are “submerged,” in the larger whole. Similarly, the distinctive personal properties of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit revealed in the new covenant can be considered “submerged”—ontologically present but not phenomenologically apparent—in the Yahweh of the burning bush, the one God of old covenant revelation.

Take this illustration one step further: the three lights illustration combined with the jazz trio in a *holographic* jazz trio analogy. The pianist, drummer, and bass player are represented by three colored holographic figures, superimposed congruently upon one another to form one dynamic figure of light. Imagine a perichoretic unity of three musicians, with a perichoretic unity of the musical parts they are playing: one jazz trio, playing one piece of music, with each of the three distinct musicians being “into” one another and into the music!

But to return to Gregory of Nazianzus: this section has considered his doctrine of perichoresis, together with the three suns illustration. Father, Son, and Spirit have been symbolized by three superimposed circles of light—as *reciprocally* and *congruently* nested distinct persons within the one divine essence.⁵³ Through the perichoresis of their

⁵² An interactive version of this three-color illustration is available at <https://www.physicsclassroom.com/Physics-Interactives/Light-and-Color/RGB-Color-Addition/RGB-Color-Addition-Interactive>, where the color circles can be moved and superimposed upon one another; accessed March 21, 2023.

⁵³ The idea of the three divine persons being fully and congruently nested in the one divine essence is found in Augustine. He states that the one essence of the one God “... is unfolded in these three. For there is nothing else of that essence besides the Trinity”: *De Trinitate* VII.6.11. There is no instance of the divine essence that subsists apart from the three divine persons. None of the divine persons subsists apart from the one undivided divine essence. The three persons and the one essence are ontologically fully congruent—eternally and necessarily.

states of consciousness, Father, Son, and Spirit are fully open and transparent to one another, as befits a fully social model of the Trinity.

Because all three are fully congruent ontologically—in being, moral perfection, knowledge, power, affect, and volition—there is no danger that the Trinity will fall apart in disagreement like some human committees. Their perfect congruence in being—a congruence that is eternal and necessary—means that Father, Son, and Spirit will always have the same knowledge of the highest good, the same desire for the highest good, and the same power to act for the highest good. Their distinct but never separated wills are always congruent, fully aligned, fully in agreement. The reciprocally and congruently nested relations of Father, Son, and Spirit are eternal and necessary relationships.

The basis for viewing the relation of Father and Son as fully and eternally congruent in being is the *homoousios* of Nicea and John 1:1—the eternal equality in being of the Son with the Father, and by implication, of both with the Holy Spirit. The Son is *in* the Father, and the Father *in* the Son not only in time, but also in eternity. There never has been, and never will be, a time when the Son is not in the Father or the Father in the Son—in a perichoretic intimacy none greater than which can be conceived.

The Father is fully nested in the Son, and the Son fully nested in the Father, and so for the Spirit, necessarily and eternally. The Triune unity is not merely accidental or functional, but metaphysically necessary, grounded in the one perfect and undivided divine essence shared fully and equally by the three.

This metaphysical grounding of the divine persons as fully reciprocal, fully congruent subsistences in the one undivided divine essence is the metaphysical foundation of the patristic maxim, *Opera Trinitatis ad extra indivisa sunt*—the inseparable operations in the economy. The functional unity of the divine persons in action is grounded in an ontological unity in being—an ontological unity that is necessary, unchanging, and eternal.

Summary and Conclusion

This contribution has argued that the social Trinity is supported by Scripture, is logically coherent, and is not a form of tritheism. The first section extended perichoresis from states of nature, as in the two natures of Christ, to the reciprocally shared states of consciousness of Father, Son, and Spirit. An examination of New Testament texts demonstrated that not only in the economic but also in the immanent Trinity the divine persons share reciprocal awareness of their own and the other's thoughts, affects, volitions, and actions. This perichoretic sharing of interior experience in I–Thou relationships is consistent with a straightforward reading of the New Testament texts, and supports a social model in which Father, Son, and Spirit are in some respects analogous to a human community of three persons. Plantinga's model, which posits distinct but not separated states of consciousness of Father, Son, and Spirit, protects the Trinity doctrine from the suspicion of modalism sometimes imputed to Aquinas and Barth. This perichoretic sharing of interior states of consciousness was illustrated with a modernized version of Gregory of Nyssa's Peter, James, and John analogy: a jazz trio of pianist, drummer, and bass player.

In response to Stephen Davis's and Stephen Layman's concern that the distinct, self-aware persons of the social Trinity could "come unglued" or fall into disagreement, the second section of this article provided a framework for the ontological and not merely functional unity of the divine persons. The perichoretic communion of Father, Son, and Spirit was posited to be eternally and necessarily grounded, ontologically, in nested relations, fully reciprocal and fully congruent. This concept of the divine persons subsisting in reciprocally nested relationships was shown to have had its antecedents in the Trinitarian treatises of Augustine, Hilary, and John of Damascus. A modernized version of Gregory of Nazianzus's three suns illustration was presented. Three congruent circles of light—red, blue, green—were superimposed in the same space to form one circle of white light. Yet red, green, and blue circles of light were still present, each with its characteristic wavelength. The three were truly present in the same space, being ontologically present, though not phenomenologically apparent in the circle of white light.

To make the circles of light illustration more personal, an extension of the jazz trio analogy was offered: a *holographic* jazz trio. Pianist, drummer, and bass player were represented by holographic images of red, blue, and green figures, superimposed upon one another—appearing as a unified, moving image of sound and light. The holographic musicians remain distinct, but united in the perichoretic sharing of their interior musical experience, together playing the same music, “Softly.”

Analogously and more perfectly, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit subsist (unlike three musicians) *eternally and necessarily* in fully reciprocal and fully congruent nested relations, in the one undivided, morally perfect, and spiritual divine essence. All three are fully congruent in being, knowledge, disposition, desire, volition, and action. Being fully and necessarily congruent in their distinct but morally perfect wills, there is no possibility of the Trinity falling apart in conflict and disagreement. The divine freedom of the holy Trinity is not a libertarian freedom of autonomy or self-assertion, but a compatibilist freedom of the power and desire to choose the highest good, consistent with a morally perfect nature shared fully by all three.

In sum, this article has argued that the three co-eternal and co-equal divine persons of the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—should be understood as distinct but never separated centers of consciousness, knowledge, emotion, and will, fittingly exemplifying a social model of the Trinity that guards against modalism. At the same time, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are understood to be ontologically united as eternally, necessarily, congruently, and reciprocally nested hypostases. The divine persons each subsist fully in the one undivided divine essence, constituting the one true God—exemplifying not tritheism, but the monotheism of Second Temple Judaism and historic Christian faith alike.

