

## Justice as Trinitarian Oneness: A Distinctively Christian Paradigm for the 21st Century

Todd D Vasquez

**Abstract:** This article is an attempt to put forward a Trinitarian paradigm for answering ethical questions. In the first section of the article I describe the necessary and sufficient conditions for this paradigm of "Trinitarian oneness" — namely, particularity of persons, oneness of life and love, and subordination as humility. In section two I apply this paradigm some specific examples along with some suggestions for its use in other ethical contexts.

Historically within Trinitarian thought the focus has been upon metaphysical questions concerning what makes the Divine both "one and three", the traditional answer being that the Divine is "one substance and three persons." It is also traditional to hold that the persons of the Spirit and the Son are (functionally) subordinate to the Father who is considered to be the fountain from which all things derive their existence. What allows the Spirit and the Son to retain their divine equality with the Father is that they have eternally existed with the Father for all time (i.e. there never was a time before which they did not exist). In the constructive paradigm I put forward of 'Justice as Trinitarian Oneness', I turn these questions about the being and 'is-ness' of the Trinity into questions about what it means to be 'one' with others. With respect to the oneness and threeness of the Godhead, I deal not with what it means for the Divine to be one essence or substance but what it means for the persons of Father, Son, & Spirit to share one, consummate divine life; that is, to be not only one in substance but also perfectly one in life and love. As a paradigm, this element spells out the goal of human existence: to achieve the kind of oneness characterized by and perfectly consummate in the one shared life of Father, Son, & Spirit. Secondly, I deal with the particularity of the persons and use it as a model for understanding the relationships among human persons. I argue that 'particularity' and 'oneness' are inseparable and that to think of one without the other is to lead to a deformed ethic. On the one hand, to emphasize a oneness which precludes the particularity of persons is to collapse oneness into a strict conformity that scandalizes the true dignity and uniqueness we know persons have. On the other hand, to emphasize particularity which runs away from oneness is to push particularity into a radical individuality that scandalizes the oneness persons are meant to share. With respect to the functional subordination of the Spirit and Son to the Father, I deal not with the ontological and temporal relationships between the persons but whether the idea of 'subordination' is better located in questions of humility and the subordination of will(s) among persons. Chief among this idea of subordination as subordination of wills is what is revealed in the Incarnation of Jesus and what it might mean to "have this same attitude" within a Trinitarian context. Is Jesus, who is said to be "the exact representation of the Divine", in his Incarnation, revealing the subordination required to achieve the kind of consummate oneness which can be shared among persons?

Trinitarian Oneness is a paradigm formed out of attention to these three

conditions: particularity of persons, oneness of life and love, and subordination as humility. To apply this idea as an ethical paradigm is to ask how these elements should inform our ethical deliberations. Whether the question is concerning how to conduct oneself in a marital relationship or how to handle public policies, a view to these things should ask what action(s) can be taken to bring about a oneness of life and love which affirms the particularity of the individuals the action(s) will effect and asks where and to what extent all parties involved in performing the action(s) will need to humble themselves for the oneness of all.

In the second part of the paper, I spell out how the paradigm of Trinitarian Oneness can be applied to some concrete examples along with suggestions for its application to other ethical contexts. These examples will make acute the problems of 'hoarding' and 'grasping', 'ignoring' and 'coercing', each of which exploit the polarity between particularity and oneness. But they will also demonstrate why 'Justice as Trinitarian Oneness' serves as a better ethical theory than those which focus on 'equality', 'agreements', and 'virtue.' Ethical theories which focus on equality are good in so far as they serve the purpose of highlighting the dignity and uniqueness of persons. But such ethical theories fall short to the extent that they focus on the perceived antinomy between "the top" and "the bottom" rather than the "whole" and the "wholeness of the whole"; that is, to the extent that they aim at the levelization of these perceived classes by taking from "the top" to raise "the bottom" rather than upon consummating the oneness of all. Similarly, ethical theories which focus on contracts and agreements also fall short of oneness. Contracts, provided they are honored by those who've signed up for them, serve as the basis for adjudicating between conflicts of interest between parties. They therefore seek a kind of oneness. They preserve defined rights of individuals and peoples; and they maintain certain public institutions for the sake of keeping the peace and enforcing these agreements. But this oneness is a provisional oneness, a minimalist oneness. It is not consummate. It is the "interlude of peace before war" not the "peace which makes the two one." And finally, ethical theories which focus on 'virtue' need an orientation and a "for-the-sake-of-which" the virtues are pursued. This end may be defined individually (e.g. personal well-being) or corporately (e.g. the common good). But it is possible for a person to live virtuously without that person being one with others; just as it is possible for a virtuous people to seek the welfare of the state but not the oneness of the people. Trinitarian oneness thus provides the proper orientation for the virtues. It is the Common Good of common goods, and it therefore provides a more adequate framework for addressing ethical questions than those which focus on equality, civility, and happiness.