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Irrealism, Ontological Pluralism, and the Trinity

A Reply to Efird on Make/Believing the World(s)

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In my Make/Believing the World(s) I argue that a version of irrealism holds, leading to a substantial ontological pluralism, all of which is compatible with traditional Christianity. This irrealism requires the existence of a creator God, along with the creativity of humans. Call this irrealism cum ontological pluralism “theistic irrealism.” The book goes on to argue that theistic irrealism is compatible with traditional Christianity. David Efird argues that if theistic irrealism is accurate, not only could Christians be irrealists but that they should be, for theistic irrealism gives Christians the tools to solve the problem of identity among members of the Trinity. While Efird’s suggestion is a generous one, and one that I would enjoy having as a result of my proposal, the theistically irrealistic traditional Christian should reject it.

Here is why. Efird writes that the most promising way to deal with the logical problem of the Trinity is to reject the standard logic of absolute identity for a non-standard logic of relative identity, according to which apparent statements of identity, such as that the Father is the Son, are incomplete statements requiring the completion by a sortal, such as the Father is the same divinity as the Son. So, on this conception of identity, the Father is the same divinity as the Son but the Father is not the same person as the Son. On this conception and logic of identity, the doctrine of the Trinity is logically consistent.¹

ABSTRACT: In response to my Make/Believing the World(s), Efird argues that theistic irrealism provides the grounds for solving the problem of the Trinity. I argue that Efird is wrong so long as theistic irrealism is to remain consistent with traditional, orthodox Christianity. On his reading of theistic irrealism, the best he can provide is a modalist version of the Trinity.

Dummett objects that relative identity entails that what quantifiers range over is "an amorphous lump of reality." This lump is then divided into things by choosing a particular criterion of identity. Efrid uses theistic irrealism to respond to Dummett's concern and to deal with the challenge of the Trinity.

Efrid suggests that, given the framework proposed in *Make/Believing the World(s)*, sense can be made of the entailment of identity being relative to a sortal and hence the identity problem of the Trinity can be solved. He writes:

> Ontological pluralism rejects the picture on which reality is already articulated into distinct objects; rather, there are many realities, many worlds, which we create through our noetic achievements. These noetic achievements will most certainly make use of sortals when we articulate the objects which make up the worlds. This might then suggest that according to one world, God is three, and according to another, God is one, depending on the sortal selected. Perhaps this is one way in which to argue that rather than being a modus tollens, Dummett's entailment is a modus ponens from Trinitarianism to noetic irrealism together with ontological pluralism.2

Unfortunately, the grounds for this strategy are missing from and, in fact, cannot be constructed out of, theistic irrealism when combined with traditional Christian theism.

On theistic irrealism, some things and some propositions are what Michael Lynch calls "virtual absolutes." An absolute full stop is a thing that exists or proposition that is true independent of all conceptual schemes ("worlds" in the language of *Make/Believing*). A virtual absolute is a thing that exists or proposition that is true in every conceptual scheme (world). On theistic irrealism, there are no full stop absolutes. Nevertheless, there are some things that are what they are, and some propositions that are always true. It is just that they are what they are, or true, *in a world*. Yet some virtually absolute things have "thin" properties and those properties can be "thickened" up in various worlds in different ways.

Now God, on theistic irrealism, is a virtual absolute. There is no well-formed world, no well-formed conceptual scheme, in which God does not exist. The question is, what is the nature of that God? If traditional Christianity is to be compatible with theistic irrealism, God must have the essential properties that God has according to Christianity. Now surely one of the essential properties of the Christian God qua Christian is the divine's Trinitarian nature. So God is a Trinity in all worlds. How can that be, given the pluralism of theistic irrealism? Well, some things are virtual absolutes, and hence those things, qua the things they are, have properties that hold in all the worlds. That includes a thing's essential properties. So if the God at the

2. Ibid., 406.
The base of theistic irrealism is the Christian God, then that God is always a Trinity in all the worlds.

That does not entail that God is entirely fixed across worlds. Theistic irrealism argues that humans do contribute to God's very nature. We do so by "thickening" up God's thin properties, the latter of which are identified as the properties at the divine's core being. It is God's core being that holds across all worlds. But the Christian God is a Trinity and must be in all worlds. Hence God's being a Trinity is a thin property that obtains in every irrealistic world. To divide up God into "one" in one world and "three" in another but not one and three in any given world would be inconsistent with traditional Christianity. Of course, how the notion of "being a Trinity of persons but one essence" is thickened up is open to various possibilities. That is one of the strengths of theistic irrealism. But one of the possibilities is not that God is three in one world and one in another. God must be both in all, even if just thinly so.

A case can be made that the God of theistic irrealism itself need not be the Christian God. Under those circumstances, God need not be triune. But the Christian God is triune. Hence, if theistic irrealism is to be compatible with traditional Christianity, the account of God must be triune. On Efird's suggestions we end up with a sort of (philosophically rooted) theological modalism (where God is not always the Father, Son, and Spirit but only sometimes) rather than the full-blooded Trinitarianism of orthodox Christianity.

If, on the other hand, the God who grounds theistic irrealism is taken to be a generic God—a God free of the peculiarities of the historic religions—then perhaps for some Christians Efird's suggestions will work, for then we humans can construct God in Efird's more apparently consistent manner. But one gets a less than traditional Christianity should one take that route, for God is not always a Trinity but only if humans construct God to be thus. That is a little far distant from traditional Christianity. But even if God were thought of along those lines, it seems that the logical problem of identity in the Trinity does not go away. Even with a generic notion of God, that God must turn up in every noetically created world, for God is a virtual absolute. That God must have some properties the divine has across all worlds, even if thin ones. Surely one of the thin properties of a generic God would be oneness. But then in the world where humans make God a Trinity, God would still be one. And if one, then is not the Christian facing the paradoxes of the traditional account of the Trinity except limited to the "Christian" worlds she creates? God would be both one God and yet three distinct persons.

Make/Believing the World(s) attempts to argue that there are good grounds for irrealism cum pluralism but then continues on to argue that God should be understood as central to any irrealism cum pluralism. It does not argue that that God must be the Christian God. However, there are arguments
in the book that make the Christian God a very plausible candidate for the ultimate ground of being. Specifically those arguments explain God in terms of sociality and hence a Trinitarian account seems plausibly the best. Yet I think that showing that theistic irrealism is compatible with traditional Christianity is the best that can be done. So although it would be nice to have solved the mystery of the Trinity, and to have a positive reason for the Christian qua Christian to become theistic irrealists, it seems that theistic irrealism cannot do the former and does not have the grounds for doing the latter. Not, at least, on the grounds laid out by Efrid. His kind suggestion should be rejected.