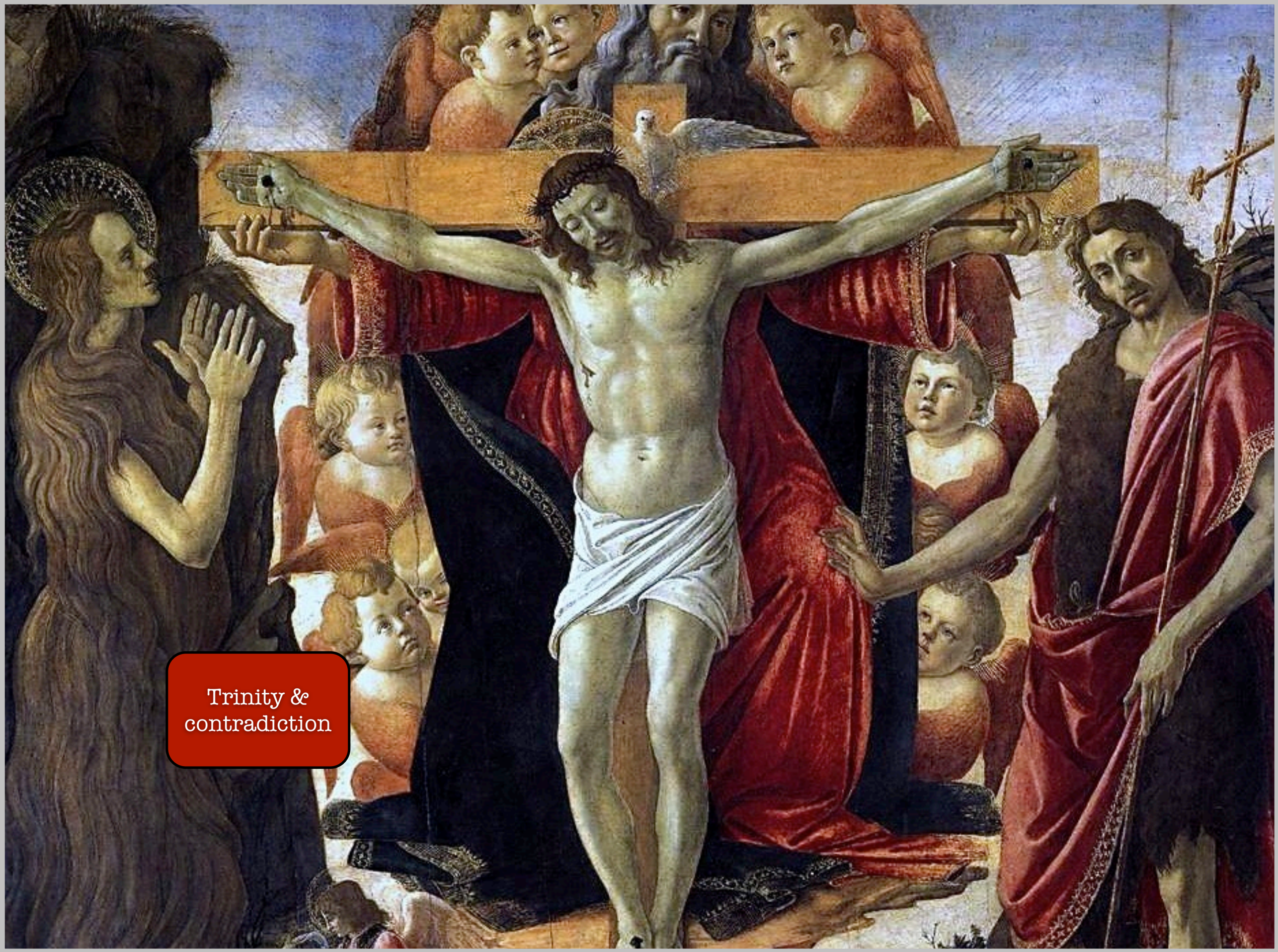
Trinity &
contradiction

I believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible.

I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all ages. God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father; through him all things were made. For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven, and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate, he suffered death and was buried, and rose again on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead and his kingdom will have no end.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets.

I believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. I confess one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins and I look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.

Today we'll discuss one of the most distinctive, and philosophically most problematic, Christian doctrines: the doctrine of the Trinity.

It is tempting to see the doctrine of the Trinity as something very abstract, and far removed from actual religious belief. But I think that this would be a mistake; one reason why is brought out in the following passage from Peter van Inwagen:

Like Christians, Jews and Muslims believe that power and goodness and wisdom and glory are from everlasting to everlasting. But only Christians believe this of love, for the eternality of love is a fruit of the uniquely Christian doctrine of the Holy Trinity. The doctrine of the Trinity is no arid theological speculation. It is not a thing that Christians can ignore when they are not thinking about philosophy or systematic theology. The doctrine of the Trinity ought to have as central a place in Christian worship and religious feeling as the doctrines of the Crucifixion and Resurrection.

To see why this doctrine has seemed so problematic to many, it will be useful to begin with one of the historically most important statements of the doctrine: that from the Athanasian Creed, traditionally attributed to St. Athanasius.

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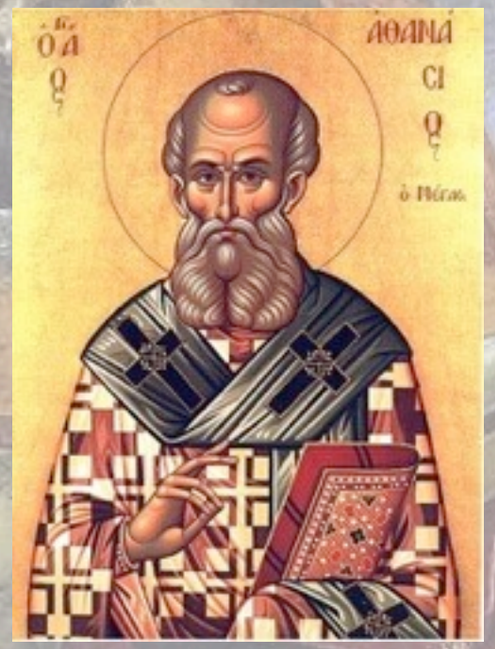

To see why this doctrine has seemed so problematic to many, it will be useful to begin with one of the historically most important statements of the doctrine: that from the Athanasian Creed, traditionally attributed to St. Athanasius.

> And the Catholic Faith is this, that we worship one God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity. Neither confounding the Persons, nor dividing the Substance. For there is one Person of the Father, another of the Son, and another of the Holy Ghost. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Ghost is all One, the Glory Equal, the Majesty Co-Eternal. Such as the Father is, such is the Son, and such is the Holy Ghost. …
>
> So the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Ghost is God. And yet they are not Three Gods, but One God.

It seems like the doctrine of the Trinity, as stated in the Athanasian Creed, includes at least seven theses.

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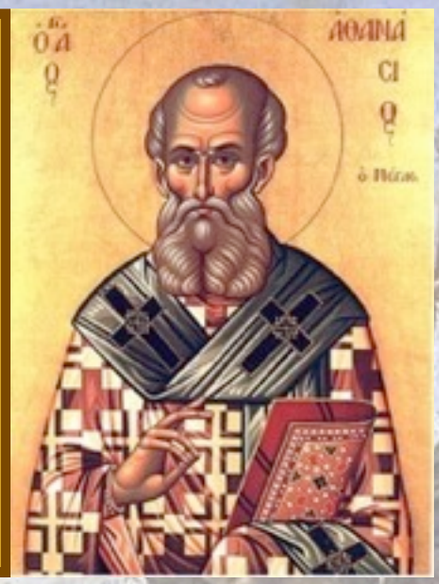

It seems like the doctrine of the Trinity, as stated in the Athanasian Creed, includes at least seven theses.

The first three are stated explicitly in the last paragraph:

(1) The Father is God.

(2) The Son is God.

(3) The Holy Spirit is God.

The next three seem to follow from the claim that we ought not to "confound the persons"

(4) The Father is not the Son.

(5) The Father is not the Holy Spirit.

(6) The Son is not the Holy Spirit.

And the last is stated a few times:

(7) There is exactly one God.

It seems plausible that none of these 7 theses can be denied by anyone who endorses the traditional doctrine of the Trinity.

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But (1*)-(6*) are contradictory. This can be shown in many ways. But the simplest begins with the obvious fact that identity is transitive, so that if x=y and y=z, it follows that x=z.

To see why it has seemed hard to accept all seven of these theses, it will be useful to give one initially plausible interpretation of 1-6 on which they are contradictory.

Let's suppose that "is" in each of 1-6 means "is identical to." Then we can restate 1-6 as follows.

But from the transitivity of identity plus (1*) and (2*), it follows that

The Father = the Son

which contradicts (4*).

(1) The Father is God.

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So it looks like we need an interpretation of the “is” in some of (1)-(6) in which it does not express identity.

Here’s an obvious candidate: perhaps we can take the “is” in (1)-(3) to express not identity, but predication — much like the “is” in “Bob is happy.” We are not saying, absurdly, that God is identical to the property of happiness; rather, we’re just saying that God has the property of being happy.

So suppose that we interpret (1)-(3) as (1P)-(3P) (the “P” stands for ‘predication’).

(1) The Father is God.

(2) The Son is God.

(3) The Holy Spirit is God.

(1P) The Father has the property of being God.

(2P) The Son has the property of being God.

(3P) The Holy Spirit has the property of being God.

(4) The Father is not the Son.

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This looks like progress, for now there is no contradiction between (1P-3P), on the one hand, and (4*)-(6*), on the other.

To see this, consider the following six claims:

i. Fido has the property of being a dog.
ii. Jackson has the property of being a dog.
iii. Butch has the property of being a dog.
iv. Fido ≠ Jackson.
v. Fido ≠ Butch.
vi. Jackson ≠ Butch.

There's plainly no contradiction in i-vi, which looks like good news.

But trouble lurks right around the corner. It looks like i-vi logically imply

> There are at least three dogs.

Just so, (1P)-(3P) and (4*)-(6*) together logically imply

> There are at least three Gods.

And that is the heresy of polytheism, which contradicts claim (7).

(1) The Father is God.

(2) The Son is God.

(3) The Holy Spirit is God.

(1P) The Father has the property of being God.

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(3P) The Holy Spirit has the property of being God.

(4) The Father is not the Son.

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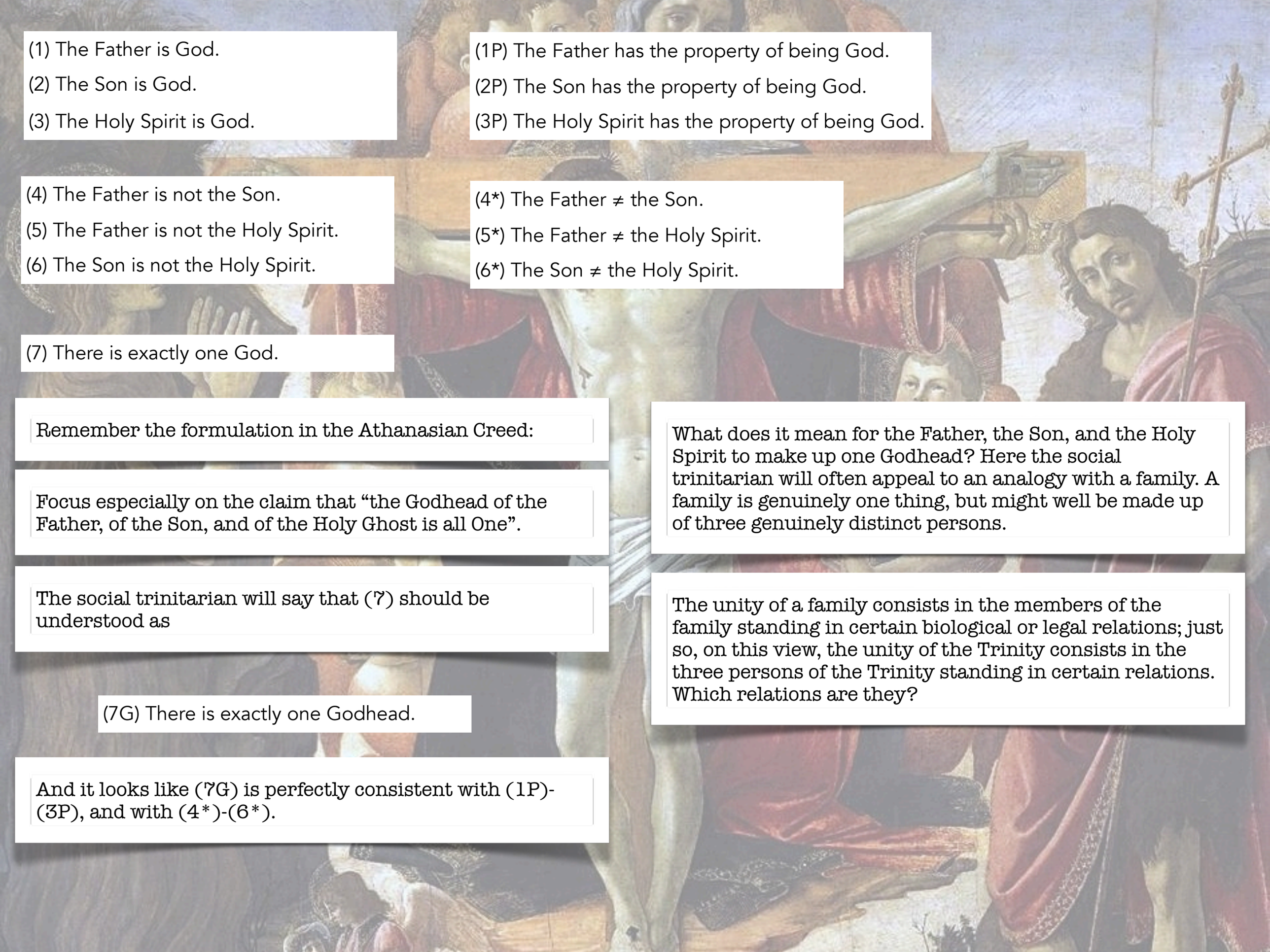
Here's one way of responding to this problem, which is characteristic of a family of views which is historically associated with the Eastern Church, and is often called 'social trinitarianism.' One might say that 'God' means something different in (1)-(3) than it means in (7).

Remember the formulation in the Athanasian Creed:

Focus especially on the claim that "the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost is all One".

And the Catholic Faith is this, that we worship one God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity. Neither confounding the Persons, nor dividing the Substance. For there is one Person of the Father, another of the Son, and another of the Holy Ghost. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Ghost is all One, the Glory Equal, the Majesty Co-Eternal. Such as the Father is, such is the Son, and such is the Holy Ghost. …

So the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Ghost is God. And yet they are not Three Gods, but One God.



(1) The Father is God.

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Remember the formulation in the Athanasian Creed:

Focus especially on the claim that “the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost is all One”.

The social trinitarian will say that (7) should be understood as

(7G) There is exactly one Godhead.

And it looks like (7G) is perfectly consistent with (1P)-(3P), and with (4*)-(6*).

What does it mean for the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit to make up one Godhead? Here the social trinitarian will often appeal to an analogy with a family. A family is genuinely one thing, but might well be made up of three genuinely distinct persons.

The unity of a family consists in the members of the family standing in certain biological or legal relations; just so, on this view, the unity of the Trinity consists in the three persons of the Trinity standing in certain relations. Which relations are they?

(1) The Father is God.

(2) The Son is God.

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Here's what Richard Swinburne, a contemporary defender of social trinitarianism, says:

…the three divine individuals taken together would form a collective source of the being of all other things; the members would be totally mutually dependent and necessarily jointly behind each other's acts. This collective ... would be indivisible in its being for logical reasons—that is, the kind of being that it would be is such that each of its members is necessarily everlasting, and would not have existed unless it had brought about or been brought about by the others. The collective would also be indivisible in its causal action in the sense that each would back totally the causal action of the others. ... It is they, however, rather than it, who, to speak strictly, would have the divine properties of omnipotence, omniscience, etc.... Similarly this very strong unity of the collective would make it, as well as its individual members, an appropriate object of worship.

(1) The Father is God.

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This view of the Trinity has a number of merits. For one thing, it takes (4)-(6) — the distinctness claims — at face value, and clearly avoids contradiction.

The central question facing this view is whether it can escape the charge of polytheism. To many, the claim that the Godhead is a unity made up of three beings, each of which has the property of being God, just is the tritheist claim that there are three distinct gods, which stand in certain interesting relations to each other.

The understanding of the Trinity which has prevailed in the Western church does not accept (1P)-(3P) and (4*)-(6*) and avoid contradiction with (7) by reinterpreting it as something like (7G). So how does the Western understanding of the Trinity avoid contradiction?

Let's begin with Aquinas' statement of part of his doctrine of the Trinity:

"From premises already laid down it follows that there are several divine persons. For then it was shown above that 'person' used of God means relation as a subsisting thing in the divine nature. It was also held that in God there are several real relations. Hence it follows that there are several subsisting beings in the divine nature. This means that there are several persons in God." (*Summa Theologica*, 1a q. 30, article i)

In Aquinas' view, it seems that the persons of the Trinity — the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — are different relations in which God stands to God.

What does this mean? Can you think of distinct relations in which you stand to yourself?

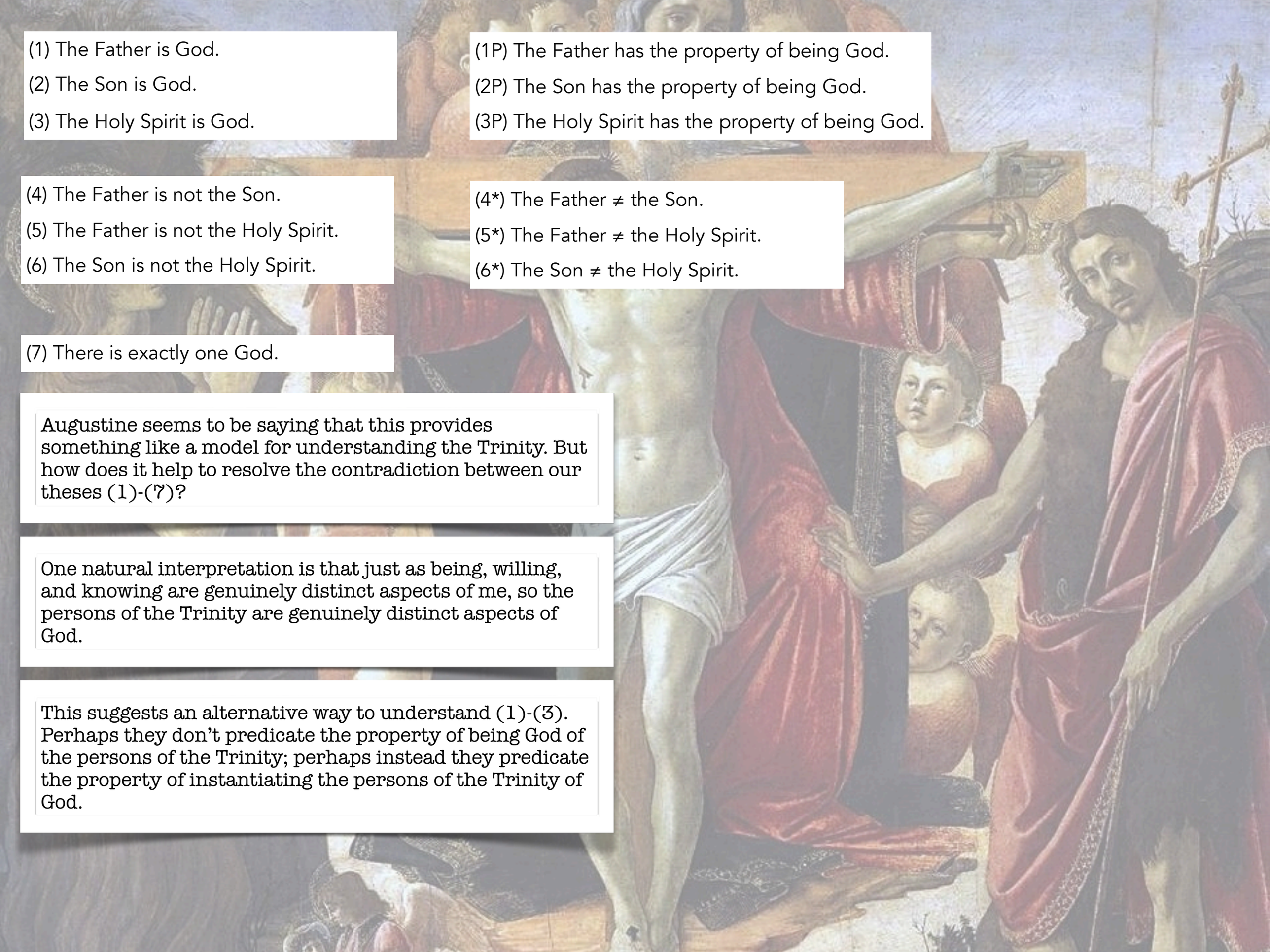
In some sense, Aquinas appears to be thinking of the persons of the Trinity as certain aspects of God.

In this he was following in a long tradition, one of whose most important members was Augustine. In the Confessions, Augustine wrote

"Who can understand the omnipotent Trinity? … I wish human disputants would reflect on a certain three things in their very own selves. These three things are very different from the Trinity, but I say that people could well exercise themselves and test and sense how far distant they are from it. I am talking about these three things: being, knowing, and willing. For I am and I know and I will. In that I know and will, I am. And I know myself to be and will. And I will to be and to know. Let him who can, see in these three things how inseparable a life is: one life, one mind, and one essence, how there is, finally, an inseparable distinct, and yet a distinction."

Augustine points out that each of us exemplifies being, knowing, and willing. Furthermore, these aren't simply distinct properties — like my being a teacher and my being from Ohio. Rather, each of these seems to be part of my essence — and each seems to be an aspect of me which is required for the other two. And yet they are genuinely distinct, and I am genuinely one thing.

Augustine seems to be saying that this provides something like a model for understanding the Trinity. But how does it help to resolve the contradiction between our theses (1)-(7)?



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One natural interpretation is that just as being, willing, and knowing are genuinely distinct aspects of me, so the persons of the Trinity are genuinely distinct aspects of God.

This suggests an alternative way to understand (1)-(3). Perhaps they don't predicate the property of being God of the persons of the Trinity; perhaps instead they predicate the property of instantiating the persons of the Trinity of God.

(1) The Father is God.

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(1M) God has the property of being the Father.

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Now let's look at our seven theses — (1M)-(3M), (4*)-(6*), and (7) — and ask whether they are contradictory or not. And it seems that they are not. Consider the following seven claims:

My dog has the property of being a collie.
My dog has the property of being badly trained.
My dog has the property of being brown.
Being a collie ≠ being badly trained.
Being a collie ≠ being brown.
Being badly trained ≠ being brown.
I have exactly one dog.

These seem perfectly consistent; so if our interpretations above are otherwise acceptable, we have solved the logical problem of the Trinity.

(1) The Father is God.

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Unfortunately, they are not. To interpret (1)-(3) as (1M)-(3M) is to adopt the heretical view known as **modalism**, according to which the different persons of the Trinity are just different modes of God:

"Father", "Son", "Holy Spirit" are not simply names designating modalities of the divine being, for they are really distinct from one another. (§254)

Augustine and Aquinas were not intending to be modalists. The question is how we can understand their views in a way which avoids collapsing them into modalism.

Let's now consider two recent attempts to do that.

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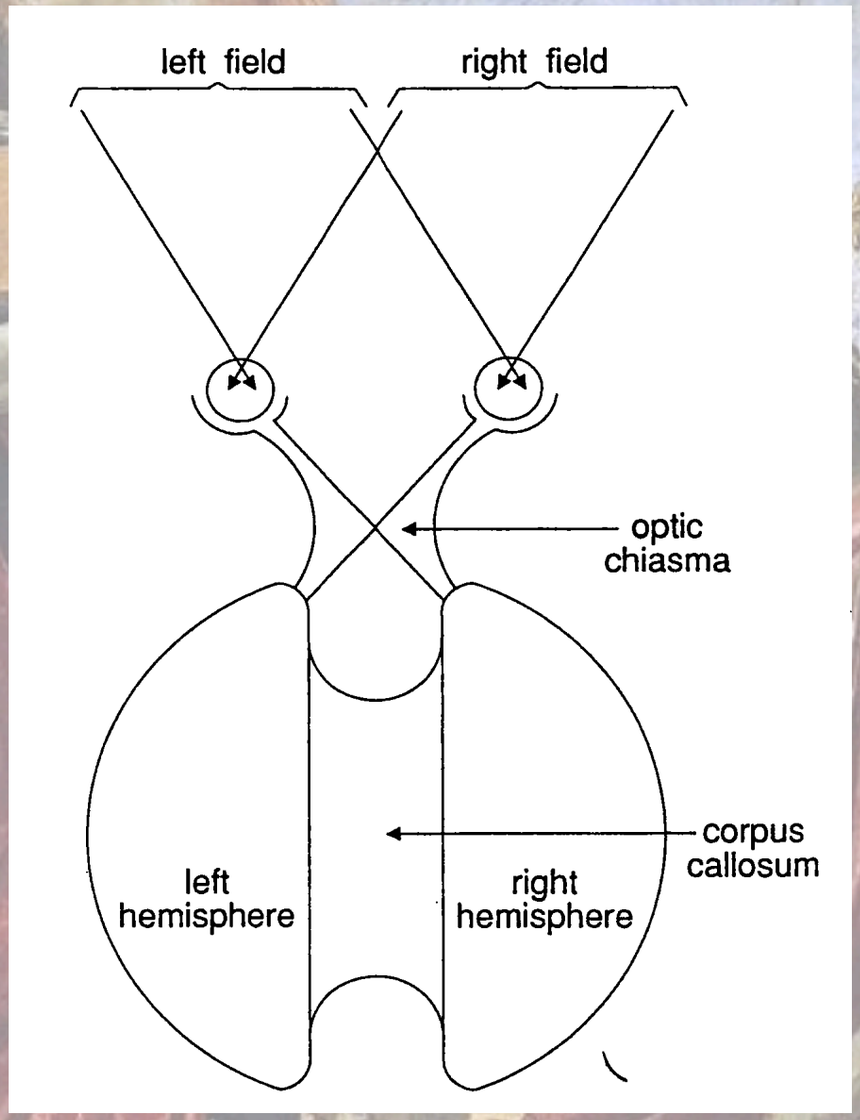
Recall that Augustine tried to explain the Trinity using a psychological analogy. One way to try to make use of this analogy without falling into modalism (which is explored in one of the optional readings on the web site) is to draw an analogy between the Trinity and the fascinating traits of split-brain patients.

Split brain patients are patients who — typically as a way of stopping seizures from occurring — have had their corpus callosum severed.

The corpus callosum is a pathway which connects the left and right hemispheres of the human brain and, in normal subjects, allows the two hemispheres of the brain to exchange information.

If the corpus callosum is severed, the two hemispheres of the brain cannot exchange information. So any sensory data about the environment available to, for example, the left hemisphere, will not be available to guide the movements of the left hand, which is controlled by the right hemisphere. Information available only to the right hemisphere will not be reportable in speech, since speech is controlled by the left hemisphere.

The results of giving sensory data to just one of the hemispheres of the brain of such a patient are striking.



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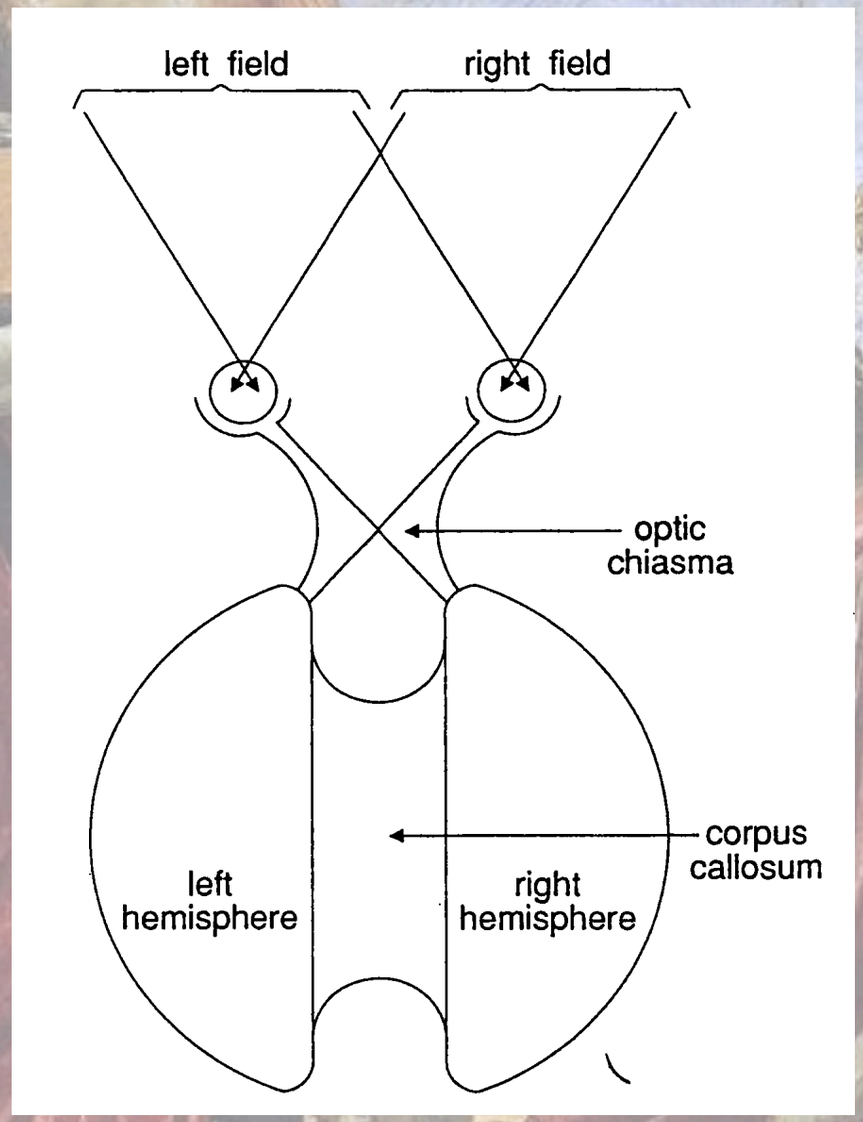
The results are as follows. What is flashed to the right half of the visual field, or felt unseen by the right hand, can be reported verbally. What is flashed to the left half field or felt by the left hand cannot be reported, though if the word 'hat' is flashed on the left, the left hand will retrieve a hat from a group of concealed objects if the person is told to pick out what he has seen. At the same time he will insist verbally that he saw nothing. Or, if two different words are flashed to the two half fields (e.g. 'pencil' and 'toothbrush') and the individual is told to retrieve the corresponding object from beneath a screen, with both hands, then the hands will search the collection of objects independently, the right hand picking up the pencil and discarding it while the left hand searches for it, and the left hand similarly rejecting the toothbrush which the right had lights upon with satisfaction.

(from Nagel, "Brain bisection and the unity of consciousness")



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One particularly poignant example of conflict between the hemispheres is as follows. A pipe is placed out of sight in the patient's left hand, and he is then asked to write with his left hand what he was holding. Very laboriously and heavily, the left hand writes the letters P and I. Then suddenly the writing speeds up and becomes lighter, the I is converted to an E, and the word is completed as PENCIL. Evidently the left hemisphere has made a guess based on the appearance of the first two letters, and has interfered, with ipsilateral control. But then the right hemisphere takes over control of the hand again, heavily crosses out the letters ENCIL, and draws a crude picture of a pipe.[6]

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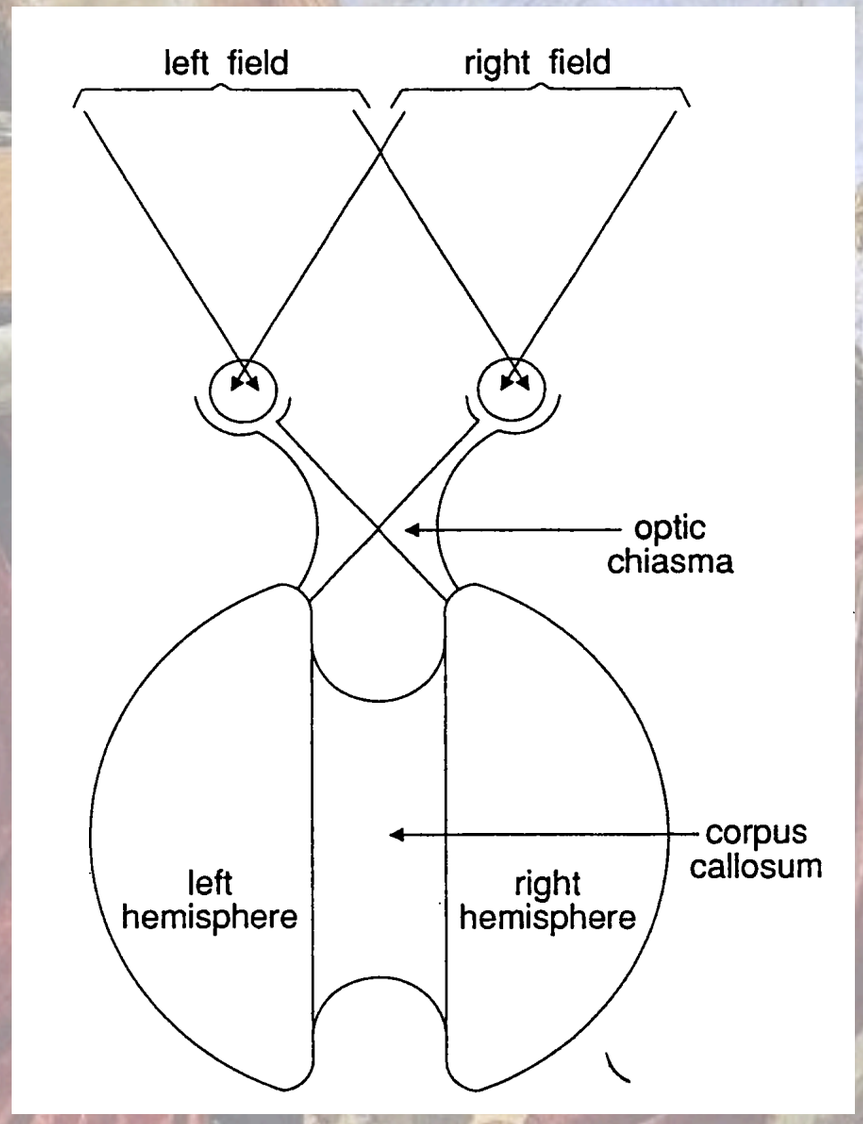

We can even, as the philosopher Derek Parfit noted, imagine a variant of the case on which transitions between divided and undivided minds are under the control of the subject. For suppose that I have

> "...been equipped with some device that can block communication between my hemispheres. Since this device is connected to my eyebrows, it is under my control. By raising an eyebrow I can divide my mind. In each half of my divided mind I can then, by lowering an eyebrow, reunite my mind."

What does all of this have to do with the Trinity?

In these experiments, we seem to have two distinct 'spheres of consciousness' inside of one person. Let's call these two spheres of consciousness 'Lefty' and 'Righty.'

Now let's ask: are Lefty and Righty distinct people? Here's an argument that they are not: if we learned how to prevent the relevant seizures without the severing of a corpus callosum, we might try to re-attach the two hemispheres. This would make at least one of Lefty and Righty cease to exist. But this would not be killing a person. So Lefty and Righty are not distinct people.

So Lefty and Righty seem to be distinct subjects 'inside' a single person — let's call him Person.

Now: what are the relations between Lefty, Righty, and Person?

Let's, following Trenton Merricks, fill out the story about Lefty, Righty, and Person in a little more detail. Let's suppose that Person is not a physical thing, like a human being, but rather a disembodied spirit — though one with, like our split brain patients, a divided consciousness.

How might Person explain her situation to you? Merricks suggests that

> "[Person] realizes that these claims will seem odd to you. So she tries to cast light on them by explaining her somewhat peculiar nature. She says things like: "I am one immaterial person but two spheres of consciousness." She is careful to insist that she is not two immaterial persons. And she emphasizes that Lefty and Righty are not merely roles she occupies."

And this of course sounds quite a lot like what we are told about the Trinity.

Since they are distinct spheres of consciousness, it seems that Lefty ≠ Righty.

And it does seem right that Lefty and Righty aren't **just** properties, or modes, of Person.

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Let's, following Trenton Merricks, fill out the story about Lefty, Righty, and Person in a little more detail. Let's suppose that Person is not a physical thing, like a human being, but rather a disembodied spirit — though one with, like our split brain patients, a divided consciousness.

How might Person explain her situation to you? Merricks suggests that

"[Person] realizes that these claims will seem odd to you. So she tries to cast light on them by explaining her somewhat peculiar nature. She says things like: "I am one immaterial person but two spheres of consciousness." She is careful to insist that she is not two immaterial persons. And she emphasizes that Lefty and Righty are not merely roles she occupies."

And this of course sounds quite a lot like what we are told about the Trinity.

Since they are distinct spheres of consciousness, it seems that Lefty ≠ Righty.

And it does seem right that Lefty and Righty aren't **just** properties, or modes, of Person.

Here's a harder question: what exactly is the relationship between Lefty (or Righty) and Person? And are Lefty and Righty persons?

It seems that the most straightforward answer to these questions are:

Lefty ≠ Person
Lefty is not a person.

But if we're using this as a model for the Trinity, where Lefty and Righty are analogues of the three persons of the Trinity and Person is the analogue of God, this gives us claims like

The Father ≠ God
The Father does not have the property of being God.

And this contradicts claims (1)-(3) on all of our interpretations.

(1P) The Father has the property of being God.

(2P) The Son has the property of being God.

(3P) The Holy Spirit has the property of being God.

(4*) The Father ≠ the Son.

(5*) The Father ≠ the Holy Spirit.

(6*) The Son ≠ the Holy Spirit.

(7) There is exactly one God.

This looks like a problem for the 'split brain analogy' for understanding the Trinity.

Here's a harder question: what exactly is the relationship between Lefty (or Righty) and Person? And are Lefty and Righty persons?

In response, the proponent of this analogy is likely to say things very similar to what the proponent of social trinitarianism says: that there is some sense of "person" on which Lefty and Righty are persons, and a different sense of "person" in which Person is a person — and hence that, by analogy, "God" should be interpreted differently in (1)-(3) than it is in (7).

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Lefty is not a person.

That doesn't mean that this sort of psychological analogy adds nothing to social trinitarianism. The closeness of the relation in which Lefty and Right stand to each other might well provide a plausible defense against the charge that social trinitarianism is a form of polytheism.

But if we're using this as a model for the Trinity, where Lefty and Righty are analogues of the three persons of the Trinity and Person is the analogue of God, this gives us claims like

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One might, though, hope for something more; one might hope for a view of the Trinity according to which the sense of "God" in which the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all God **is exactly the same sense of the term** as the sense in which there is exactly one God.

And this contradicts claims (1)-(3) on all of our interpretations.

If we could give such a view (without collapsing into modalism) then, one might think, we'd have a more satisfactory interpretation of the doctrine.

One way in which one might try to provide such an interpretation begins in an unlikely place: with the ancient philosophical puzzle of the statue and the clay.

Imagine a sculptor taking a lump of clay, and fashioning it into a statue. It seems as though the sculptor has brought something new into existence - namely, the statue. But it also seems as though the lump of clay, which pre-existed the sculptor's work, still exists. So it seems as though where there was formerly one thing, there are now two things. But this is very puzzling. After all, the two things are, for example, located in exactly the same location - and isn't it impossible for two material objects to be in exactly the same place? What's going on here?

Here are two things that sound plausible to say about this sort of case:

(A) The statue is the same material object as the lump of clay.
(B) The statue ≠ the lump of clay.

But can we consistently say both of these things? The first claim is what we might call a **relative identity claim** — it is a claim of the form

x is the same F as y

whereas the latter is what we might call an **absolute identity claim** — a claim of the form

x=y

or

x≠y

How are these two sorts of claims related? It's natural, at first, to think that we can analyze claims of relative identity in terms of claims of absolute identity, so that

x is the same F as y

just means the same as

x is an F & y is an F & x=y

But then (A) just means the same as

(A*) The statue is a material object & the lump of clay is a material object & the statue = the lump of clay.

But (A*) contradicts (B) — so if (A*) is what (A) really means, then (A) and (B) can't, as they seem to be, both be true.

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So if we want both (A) and (B) to come out true, we can't simply take relative identity claims to be thinly disguised absolute identity claims. So how can we understand relative identity claims like (A)?

One idea, which goes back at least to Aristotle, is that material objects can be thought of as compounds of matter and form. In the present case, the lump of clay and the statue share their matter, but differ in form; one bit of matter can have more than one form at a time. (So 'form' does not just mean 'shape.')

If this is right, then

x is the same material object as y

means something like

x and y are compounds of form and matter which are made of the same matter.

Whereas

x is the same statue as y

means something like

x and y are compounds of form and matter where the form=the form of a statue which are made of the same matter.

But how does any of this help with the problem of resolving the contradiction between (1)-(7)?

(1) The Father is God.

(2) The Son is God.

(3) The Holy Spirit is God.

(1P) The Father has the property of being God.

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But how does any of this help with the problem of resolving the contradiction between (1)-(7)?

It helps by giving us an interpretation of (7) which makes it consistent with the other theses. The rough idea (developed in the optional reading from Rea & Brower) is that the divine essence stands to the persons of the Trinity in something like the same relation as the matter of the clay stands to the statue.

So we can understand (7) as the relative identity claim

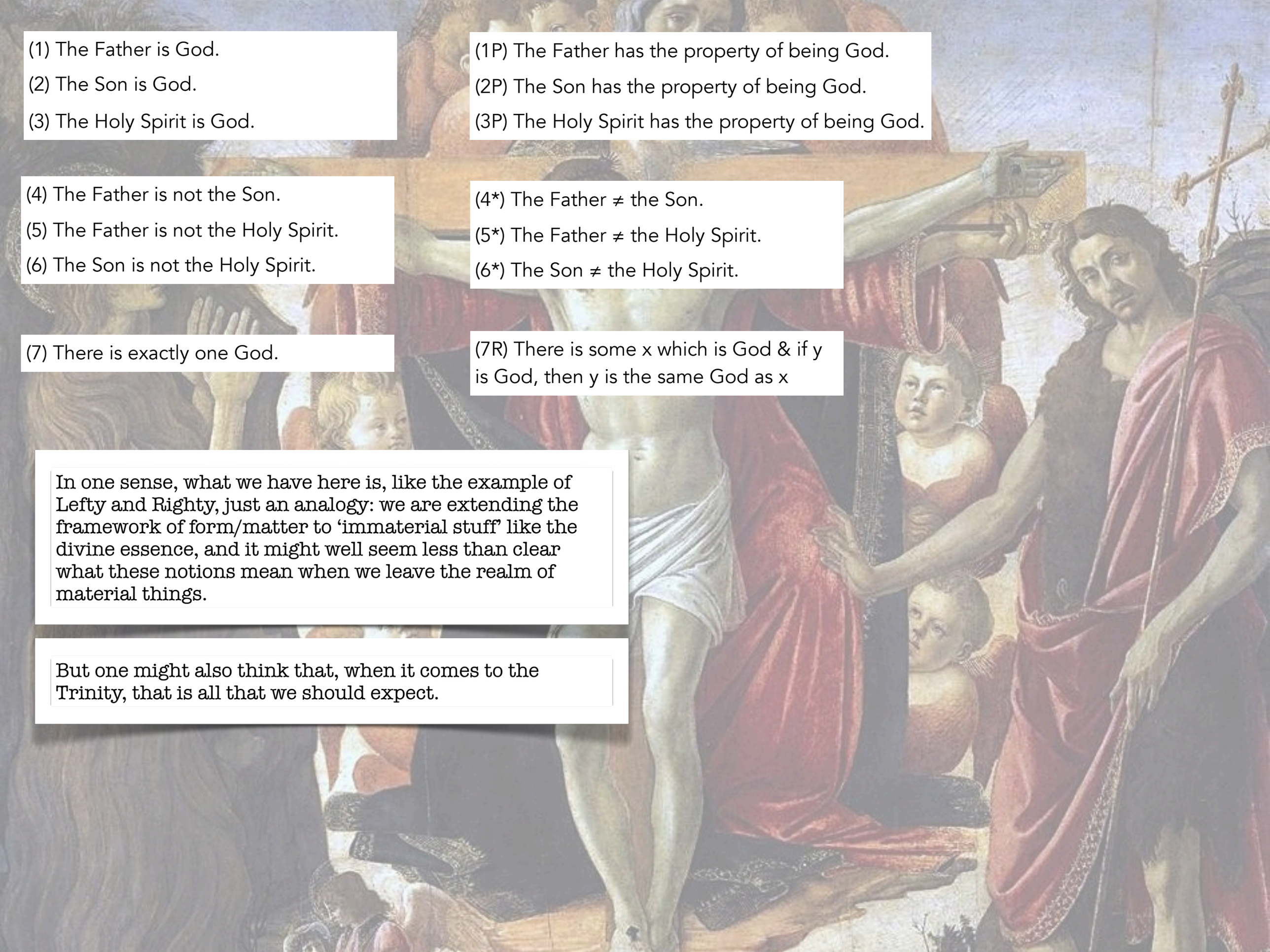
(7R) There is some x which is God & if y is God, then y is the same God as x

What does it mean to say that x is the same God as y? We understand this in much the same way we understood 'x is the same material object as y':

> x is the same God as y iff x and y are compounds of divine essence and form, and x and y have the same divine essence

Given this, we can say that the Father ≠ the Son ≠ the Holy Spirit, and that all three are God, and that all three are the same God — so that there is one God, not three.

Here's a comparison (borrowed from Rea): imagine that a certain quantity of marble is shaped into a statue, which is then moved to form the pillar of a building. We might want to say that the pillar ≠ the statue, and that both are material things, and that both are the same material thing — so that there is one material thing there, not two.



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In one sense, what we have here is, like the example of Lefty and Righty, just an analogy: we are extending the framework of form/matter to 'immaterial stuff' like the divine essence, and it might well seem less than clear what these notions mean when we leave the realm of material things.

But one might also think that, when it comes to the Trinity, that is all that we should expect.