

The God of the groups

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Abstract: I argue that Social Trinitarians can and should conceive of God as a *group person*. They *can* by drawing on recent theories of group agency realism that show how groups can be not just agents but persons distinct from their members – albeit, I argue, persons of a different kind. They *should* because the resultant novel view of the Trinity – that God is three ‘intrinsic’ persons in one ‘functional’ person – is theologically sound, effectively counters the most trenchant criticisms of Social Trinitarianism, and enjoys independent theological support from the biblical notion of ‘corporate personality’.

God is three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This all Trinitarians believe. But what exactly is meant by ‘person’? Here agreement ends. Social Trinitarians, *pace* their anti-Social brethren, insist that ‘person’ should be understood univocally as ‘a distinct center of knowledge, love, will, and action’ (Plantinga (1989), 22). Consequently, ‘God’, referring to the whole Trinity, is not *a* person, but a *group* of persons. To critics of Social Trinitarianism (hereafter ST), this is not a welcome consequence. Daniel Howard-Snyder, for instance, thinks that monotheism itself is at stake, for monotheism requires that God be ‘a person in a minimal sense’, which, according to Howard-Snyder, ‘is the sort of thing that can act intentionally’ (Howard-Snyder (2009), 124, 122). But the Social Trinitarian God (hereafter the ST God), as a group, is allegedly not that sort of thing. Social Trinitarians are thus forced to interpret statements ascribing intentional acts to God, such as creation in Genesis 1:1, as literally expressing necessary falsehoods, for ‘an intentional act cannot be performed by anything but a person’ (*ibid.*, 121). And it does not help to point out, as some Social Trinitarians have, that ‘the Trinity, while not literally *a person*, can nevertheless be regarded in some contexts, and spoken of, *as if* it were a single person, in the way this is often done with closely unified groups of human beings’ (Hasker (2013), 249, his emphasis). For even if the divine persons are functionally *like* a single person, it remains no less true that, literally speaking, ‘if God is not a

person or agent, then God does not know anything, cannot act, cannot choose, cannot be morally good, cannot be worthy of worship' (Howard-Snyder (2009), 123). 'Sadly,' Dale Tuggy solemnly concludes, 'for all its lovely virtues, this seems to be the death of ST' (Tuggy (2003), 168).

Tuggy's eulogy, however, may be a bit premature. Howard-Snyder, Tuggy, and even Social Trinitarians may be surprised to learn that many philosophers are quite prepared to argue that groups can be genuine agents or persons distinct from their members with beliefs, desires, and wills of their own. While both proponents and critics of ST acknowledge that it is natural to ascribe agency and personal characteristics to groups, both also assume such ascriptions to be non-literal.¹ But the growing body of literature on group agency realism challenges precisely that assumption. A full-blown defence of group agency realism is beyond the scope of this article. I offer instead just a sketch of points defended in that literature with the goal of showing how, *given* group agency realism, Social Trinitarians can plausibly regard God as a genuine agent and person distinct from the Father, Son, and Spirit without affronting orthodoxy. In addition to providing the resources to meet the most prominent challenges to ST, the view I recommend is independently motivated by appeal to the biblical notion of 'corporate personality'. I conclude by considering a practical benefit of the proposed view. At the very least, I hope to show that a group agency realist model of ST has enough virtues to encourage Social Trinitarians to work out – or at least live with – any accompanying vices.

Group agency realism

The case for group agency realism naturally begins with considerations of how, and in what ways, groups can meet conditions of agency. Agents come in many shapes and sizes and degrees of complexity and sophistication. But the account of agency often assumed is a modest one: an agent is anything that has representational states about how reality is, motivational states about how it wants reality to be, and the ability to process rationally and act on those states so as to attempt to get reality to fit its desires. Insects, animals, men, and even robots may all qualify as agents on this account. Houseplants, rocks, stuffed animals, and screwdrivers do not.

That groups, too, can be agents in this sense is standard fare among many philosophers. Perhaps the easiest way to see this is to observe how groups can be committed to goals and positions distinct from those of its members. Consider a (fictitious) socially hip restaurant, OrganiCopia. While OrganiCopia's vision is to support the community by serving only local, healthy food products, that vision need not be shared by any of OrganiCopia's employees (including the owners). They might not care a wit about those things. OrganiCopia simply has beliefs and desires none of the employees do. These beliefs and desires, moreover, can be shown to be *literally* beliefs and desires on standard accounts thereof and

not mere proxies.² OrganiCopia really believes the local economy and residents should be supported in a certain way and really desires to support them in that way. Furthermore, OrganiCopia *acts* on those beliefs and desires by buying and serving local, healthy products. It is, to emphasize, properly *OrganiCopia* that buys and serves these products, not its staff. If I am in charge of ordering OrganiCopia's food, I cannot for that reason boast to my hipster friends that *I* buy local. No, I buy local on OrganiCopia's behalf. It is true that a group always acts *through* its members, but in so far as a member is acting to achieve the group's ends, the *group* acts. By assuming representative roles, the members of a group serve as its mouthpiece and hands, so to speak. It seems, then, that a group can meet the conditions of agency.

Once it is recognized that groups can meet conditions of agency, it is natural to consider next whether they might meet conditions sufficient for personhood, such as being morally responsible, having free will, and having a first-person perspective. The most travelled route from group agency to group personhood is via the first of these, moral responsibility. The moral responsibility of group agents has become a topic of increased public awareness since the rise to power of the modern corporation. That some corporations (and not just their members) have behaved in morally abominable ways is as evident to many as Moore's hands were to himself, even if the *implications* of such a Moorean fact are not as obvious. It would be quite surprising, then, if it were not possible that group agents be morally responsible in some sense. There are, in fact at least two senses in which groups can be morally responsible agents.³ First, group agents can be fit to be held morally accountable for their actions, and so be the proper objects of reactive attitudes such as praise and blame.⁴ Suppose an engineering company chooses low-quality building materials to save costs on building a bridge, and, as a result, the bridge collapses and kills several pedestrians. If the engineering company refuses to upgrade on materials when constructing a replacement bridge, it ought to be held morally accountable for that, and is all the more blameworthy if its decision results in further disaster. Especially perspicuous cases are those where someone clearly deserves blame, yet none of a group's members seem culpable.⁵ In addition to being morally accountable, groups can also be moral agents in virtue of the moral character they display.⁶ For example, an oil company might have an environmentally careless attitude but by fortune avoid catastrophe. Or, a business might adopt and behave according to cut-throat principles but never cut anyone's throat. Nonetheless, the vicious character of these corporations renders them morally blameworthy. Likewise, a relief organization that is prepared to respond as wholeheartedly as possible to a disaster but never has to is nonetheless praiseworthy. Supposing moral responsibility in either of these senses is sufficient for personhood, as I think is plausible, it follows that group agents can be persons in virtue of being morally responsible agents.

The above move from agency to personhood may seem too quick for some. Morally responsible agency, in might be objected, presupposes other capacities

groups cannot have, such as a rational, first-person perspective or free will. But far from being a *reductio*, philosophers have argued that group agents can have these capacities, too (Hess (2010) and (2014b)).⁷ Consider first a rational, first-person perspective. Roughly, an agent is practically rational in so far as it acts to ensure its beliefs are well-supported and its desires properly aligned with its larger goals. Group agents that are not practically rational would not be very long-lived. If OrganiCopia did not first have reason to believe what it serves is local and healthy it probably would not remain in business for long. By establishing a system of checks and balances on where its products come from and how healthy they are, OrganiCopia ensures its practical rationality. And, as Hess observes, it is hard to see how this kind of self-assessment is possible without possessing a first-person perspective.⁸ A rational group agent does not have identity issues: OrganiCopia is not confused about what its beliefs and desires are, as opposed to, say, its members' or MacDonaldis'.

But what about free will? One might think groups cannot have free will because groups are wholly dependent on their members for acting. But the mere fact that a group depends on its members for acting does not rule out free agency. It is possible that the control exercised at the individual level is coincident with the control exercised at the group level. To explain how such joint control is possible, List & Pettit (2011, 162–163), Copp (1979), and others appeal to familiar cases of multi-level causality. Just as there can be higher- and lower-level factors that causally contribute to one event, the action of a group can be regarded as the higher-level event co-realized with the lower-level event of a particular member's being the enactor. Consider the event of a man firing a gun. The higher-level event is the man causing his finger to squeeze the trigger by acting on an intention. The lower-level event is the movement of the particular neurons that mediate the action. If you think the neurons mediating the man's actions do not rob him of the control requisite for acting freely (and, consequently, being morally responsible for the act), then you should also think the individuals mediating a group's actions do not rob it of such control, either. Once it is recognized that a group can perform its own actions on the basis of its own beliefs and desires, all that is needed for those actions to be free (on at least some conceptions of freedom) is that they be guided by a reasons-responsive mechanism internal to the group (i.e. some rational decision-making procedure in the face of alternatives). A number of mechanisms have been proposed – the most common being a voting system of sorts – but we need not endorse any particular account here.⁹

Persons: intrinsicist and functional

In so far as it is possible that groups meet the aforementioned conditions of agency and personhood, it is possible that there be group persons. Granted, saying there can be group persons invites the incredulous stare. Is this not just a confusion of what 'person' means? Perhaps it is, at least on one conception of

personhood. But the conceptual space that personhood occupies is notoriously deep, wide, and slippery. A survey of the literature on personhood, historical and contemporary, reveals no sharp concept thereof. Instead, we encounter many different conceptions of personhood, such as metaphysical (Boethian, Cartesian, Lockean), biological, moral, judicial, medical, etc. It is probably safest to put 'person' in the family-resemblance category. We might nevertheless recognize a nuclear family amidst the bunch with metaphysical persons at its core and mere legal persons as, say, in-laws. At the core of the nuclear family will be those properties and capacities commonly agreed to be sufficient for metaphysical personhood, such as being morally responsible, having free will and a rational, first-person perspective.¹⁰ Different kinds of persons might belong to the nuclear family by virtue of sharing those core elements. Indeed, *how* a person comes to have those elements might be precisely what distinguishes one kind from another. After all, some children belong to the family by birthright, others by adoption. Thus, if some x surprisingly meets a sufficient condition of metaphysical personhood, the thing to do is not to disband the family by rejecting those core elements as constitutive of membership, or disown x as a family member. It is, rather, to embrace diversity.

In that spirit, there are what I will call *intrinsicist* persons and *functional* persons, both of which belong to the nuclear family, the former by birthright and the latter by adoption.¹¹ S is an intrinsicist person by virtue of what S *is*; i.e. S 's intrinsic nature. S is a functional person by virtue of what S *does*; i.e. S 's function, behaviour, or performance; in particular, function, behaviour, or performance sufficient for making S morally responsible, free, rational, etc. Persons conceived of as Cartesian substances, I take it, are intrinsicist persons, as would be persons like you, me, fetuses, comatose patients, Zeus, Superman, angels, demons, ghosts, centaurs, satyrs, hobbits, wizards, etc.¹² Robots, a DID patient's 'alters', and group agents, by contrast, would be functional persons if persons at all.¹³ Common to all accounts of group agency realism, so far as I am aware, is the assumption that groups meet conditions of agency and personhood, if at all, functionally. So, for example, if x is morally responsible by virtue of x 's function, and x is a person by virtue of being morally responsible, it follows that x is a person by virtue of x 's function.¹⁴

The group God

The question of whether there *are* group agents must be distinguished from whether there *can* be group agents. Regardless of whether there are group agents, it seems clear that if there can be group agents, then the ST God would certainly qualify. Both Social Trinitarians and their critics often liken the ST God to a tightly-knit group like a family, community, team, or society, even going so far as to speculate about the possibility of there being a 'group mind' between the Persons (see Leftow (1999); Craig (2009)). But, for whatever reason, no one party to that

discussion seems aware of the equally lively discussion about group agency realism taking place in the next room, despite tantalizing titles like ‘Groups with minds of their own’ (Pettit (2004)). In fact, it would be just as well for group agency theorists to hold a cup to the wall, for ST may provide an interesting limit case for group agency models; the practical obstacles sometimes thought to prevent ordinary groups, like corporations, from meeting conditions of agency or personhood might not be obstacles to an *ideal* group.¹⁵ And the divine Persons, epistemically and functionally unified as tightly as they are, would doubtlessly be an ideal group. Granting the possibility of group agency realism, the question, therefore, is not whether the ST God qualifies as a group agent or person; the question is why the ST God would not.¹⁶

Here might be a reason: as mentioned above, accounts of group agency realism often exploit the possibility that a group’s attitude differs from its members’. Is such a difference possible in the present case? I do not see why not. Clearly if each individual Person is omniscient they will always agree on the truth of a matter, preventing an alethic divergence between each other and the group. But the Persons and the group may well differ in their non-propositional attitudes. Imagine that each of the divine Persons, in deciding which world to create, has unique preferences about which aesthetic features creation should display. Imagine also that they are agreed to settle such matters by majority preference. A scenario of the following kind then is at least possible. Of features F_1 – F_3 , the Father prefers F_1 and F_2 but not F_3 , the Son prefers F_1 and F_3 but not F_2 , and the Spirit prefers F_2 and F_3 but not F_1 . The result is a majority preference for each of the three features. It is at least possible, in other words, that the group’s preference state about which features the world displays differ from each of its members’. Is it so odd to think a community of perfectly rational and loving yet unique persons could settle matters in so harmonious a way, adopting not one’s own preferences but the group’s? And who knows what those preferences might really be?

The group God, therefore, will share the beliefs of its members but could have its own preferences; preferences that the members carry out on behalf of the group. Those preferences may be reflected in the classic economic distinctions between the Persons, as each reveals a distinct but common commitment to the overall plan of creation, fall, and redemption. The Father knits me in my mother’s womb and prepares for me a way that I might walk in it. The Son opens for me that way, ransoming me from sin and death. The Spirit guides me to and along that way, confirming in me the knowledge and love of God all the while. While each act is traditionally appropriated to one of the three, they are all coincidentally acts of the group, God. As for the conditions of personhood, again, it seems that if ordinary group agents can meet those conditions, so, too can the ST God.¹⁷ The way in which the ST God meets the conditions of having free will and a rational, first-person perspective, so far as I can tell, is not significantly different from how an average group agent might.¹⁸ We might well imagine one of the Persons

speaking in the first-person not as Himself but from the perspective of the group, as, for example, when God declares, 'I am the Lord your God, you shall have no other gods before me'.

But it is clearest of all that the ST God would be a moral agent. In fact, Social Trinitarians face something of a dilemma here, for they should be eager to affirm that the Triune God, and not just the individual Persons, is morally praiseworthy and worthy of worship. The Trinity *as a group*, for example, is praiseworthy for having achieved salvation for humankind. No one individual Person of the Trinity can claim to have achieved salvation for humankind on His own. Further, the Triune God is praiseworthy just for having the character of a perfectly loving community. But being morally praiseworthy and worthy of worship are sufficient for personhood. Non-persons cannot be morally praiseworthy and worthy of worship. The dilemma, then, is this: either

(A) the Triune God is morally praiseworthy and worthy of worship,

or

(B) the Triune God is not a person.

If the Social Trinitarian accepts (A) then (B) must be rejected. On the other hand, if the Social Trinitarian accepts (B), then (A) must be rejected. Social Trinitarians cannot consistently affirm both. The view recommended here – that the ST God is three intrinsic persons in one functional person – gives a clear way out of the dilemma by denying (B). But does the Social Trinitarian *want* to say that God is literally a person? Is this one too many persons for orthodox comfort? Does this not jump out of the philosophical frying pan but into the theological fire?

The quaternity worry

I began this article by quoting two philosophers who charge that ST is a non-starter because, on ST, 'God is not a person.' That, I hope is now clear, is a non sequitur, supposing groups can be persons. I also quoted a Social Trinitarian who responds to the charge by appealing to a non-realist group agency view. But pointing out that the ST God, like other groups, acts *as if* it were a person does not help: the charge, after all, is precisely that the ST God is not *really* a person. On the view developed here, God really is a person, albeit a functional person. But a functional person is a person nonetheless, as a functional person actually meets sufficient conditions of personhood.¹⁹ But maybe a realist view is susceptible to a different charge. William Hasker writes:

Should we say, as some have wanted to do, that the three persons of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit somehow literally combine to make a single person that we designate 'God? . . . On the one hand, the idea that multiple persons somehow combine so as to become literally a single person may well be incoherent, so that it does not describe a real possibility. But if we suppose

this objection to be overcome, we should then have, not a Holy Trinity, but a Holy Quaternity, the four persons being Father, Son, Holy Spirit, and God. (Hasker (2009), 46)

And of the possibility that ‘the Trinity is a mind composed of the minds of the three persons’, William Lane Craig says:

[T]he mind of the Trinity cannot be a self-conscious self in addition to the three self-conscious selves who are the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, for otherwise we have not a Trinity but Quaternity, so to speak. Therefore, the Trinity cannot itself be construed as an agent, endowed with intellect and will, in addition to the three persons of the Trinity. (Craig (2009), 93)

A straightforward quaternity of persons would no doubt be problematic. But alleging that the view developed here entails a quaternity of persons as imagined by Hasker and Craig would be misleading at best. God is not, after all, four persons of the same kind,²⁰ but three intrinsicist persons and one functional person. According to the creeds, the three Persons or *hypostases* are *homoousios*, of the same kind or nature. The Son and Spirit are whatever the Father is, and that, I take it, is what I am calling an intrinsicist person. This leaves open the question of whether they might together constitute a person of a *different* kind, a person that is not a *hypostasis*. The meaning of *hypostasis* is notoriously controversial, but it can justifiably be taken to refer to an *individual* person by underlying essence or nature. A group person is not a person by underlying essence or nature, but is rather *underlied by* such persons. On this understanding, a group person is not a *hypostasis*. Furthermore, the credal declarations are about God’s immanent being; they affirm that God, in very being or essence, is three persons. But I am claiming only that the individual Persons constitute a group person in virtue of their function. God is not immanently or essentially a group person.²¹ The view is therefore entirely consistent with affirming nothing more about God’s immanent being than what tradition has always affirmed; viz. that God is three and only three *hypostases* in one and only one *ousia*.²²

It is also for this reason that the view cannot be said to do violence to the pronouncement of Fourth Lateran Council (1215), which condemns as heretical Joachim’s view that the Persons’ unity of essence ‘is not true and proper but rather collective and analogous, in the way that many persons are said to be one people and many faithful one church’ (quoted in Tanner (1990), 231). Joachim thought that affirming the Persons’ unity in any stronger sense would result in ‘not so much a Trinity as a quaternity, that is to say three persons and a common essence as if this were a fourth person’ (*ibid.*, 231). As the council reports, Joachim therefore interprets the Persons’ unity as analogous to Christ’s faithful, who ‘are not one in the sense of a single reality which is common to all. They are one *only in this sense*, that they form one church through the unity of the catholic faith’ (*ibid.*, 231; my emphasis). Although seeing the ST God as a group agent or person does – with Joachim – see the Persons’ unity as forming a group analogous to a church, it is consistent with affirming – contra Joachim – a deeper, ‘true and proper’ metaphysical sense of unity between the Persons as

well.²³ The council avoids positing a *quaedam summa res* by *identifying* each of the three persons with the unitary substance, essence, or divine nature. But the view proposed here need not be committed to an immanent *quaedam summa res*, either, but only to what is constituted by and supervenient on the three Persons in virtue of their function. For the quaternity worry to brand the present view as heterodox, further restrictions than those implied by the creeds would have to be defended.

Nevertheless, the asking price for the view that God, in addition to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is a person still might seem steep. To avoid the letter of heresy is not to enjoy the spirit of orthodoxy. So perhaps another benefit can be thrown in: the notion of ‘corporate personality’ constitutes independent biblical support for the view (or one similar), and with it an effective counter is made to Dale Tuggy’s divine deception argument against ST.

Divine deception?

Dale Tuggy thinks the alleged consequence of ST that ‘God is not a person’ also underwrites a distinctively moral objection to ST. He writes, ‘if Social Trinitarianism were true, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit would have engaged in wrongful deception via both Old and New Testament revelation’ (Tuggy (2004), 269). The deception is that the three persons ‘passed themselves off as one personal being, while in fact they were three personal beings’ (*ibid.*, 273). Tuggy recognizes that not all acts of deception are wrong, but nonetheless thinks this one is. To help us see how, he invites us to consider a parallel case.

Suppose Annie, a lonely foster child, receives a phone call one day from a man named Fred claiming to be her father. Fred legally adopts Annie, but for unknown reasons, Fred will not see Annie in person. They grow close over the years, communicating by phone and by email. Finally, after years of lovingly raising Annie from a distance, Fred announces that he will pay her a visit. But, to Annie’s surprise (and horror), not one man greets her, but *three* men – Don, Jon, and Ron – each of whom played an essential role in raising Annie over the years, though taking care to make themselves indistinguishable and so appear as one, Fred. Don, Jon, and Ron, Tuggy thinks, are morally blameworthy for not letting Annie in on the tri-parent situation. Annie ‘could have been introduced to one or more of the three instead of the fictional “Fred”’, Tuggy suggests, or ‘she could have been told that she had three dads’ (*ibid.*, 272). Instead, she was led to trust and believe in and grow childlike affections for someone who does not even exist. *Mutatis mutandis*, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are guilty for similarly deceiving their early followers. But because the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit cannot possibly act wrongly, ST should be rejected. Tuggy outlines the argument as follows:

- (1) If ST is true, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit acted like Don, Jon, and Ron.
- (2) Don, Jon, and Ron acted wrongly.

- (3) Therefore, if ST is true, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit acted wrongly.
- (4) But it is false that any member of the Trinity has acted wrongly.
- (5) Therefore, ST is false.

Granting (2), the main premise of the argument is (1). If (1) is to be true then the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit need to have acted like Don, Jon, and Ron *in inducing the belief that they are only one person*, when in fact they are not one but three persons. Just as Don, Jon, and Ron passed themselves off to Annie as one person (i.e. Fred), the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit passed themselves off to the ancients²⁴ as one person (i.e. Yahweh). But on ST

there is no personal being which later turns out to be tri-personal [read: ‘... no one person who later turns out to be three persons’]. What there are, are three beings which can appear to be one, which act much as one, and which can be thought of as one, but which are, for all that, numerically distinct persons. In ancient times, people thought this collective was a person, that is, a subject of consciousness with knowledge and the ability to intentionally act. But their beliefs about God weren’t, according to ST, merely incomplete, but rather radically mistaken. They mistook a non-person for a person. (Tuggy (2004), 273)

Tuggy goes on to produce a ‘sampling of scriptural evidence’ for the claim that the Lord/Yahweh was believed by the ancients to be ‘a wonderful person, not a wonderful thing (or quasi-thing), community of divinities’. Thus he concludes: ‘In revealing themselves, the Three need only have emphasized their functional unity; introduction of the fictional “Yahweh” seems unnecessary and wrong’ (*ibid.*, 280).

Notice that Tuggy assumes that Fred and Yahweh, as *personae fictae*, are reducible to their respective members; thus he asks whether the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, acted like Don, Jon, and Ron, not whether Yahweh acted like Fred. But as we have seen, such a reduction cannot be taken for granted, supposing Fred and Yahweh are group agents; and group agents, on any realist account, have ‘knowledge and the ability to intentionally act’. And if we suppose Fred and Yahweh have acted wrongly, they must be regarded as persons and not just agents given that moral responsibility is sufficient for personhood. If Fred and Yahweh are persons, is not a crucial assumption of Tuggy’s argument undercut? Not quite. What matters is not simply Annie’s belief that Fred is a person, but *Annie’s belief that Fred is a certain kind of person*; namely, the kind of person that *cannot be a group person*. If Annie were led to believe, either by just the men or by Fred also, that Fred is the kind of person that cannot be a group person, the deception remains. And how could she not have believed this? Two thousand years of western thought have bequeathed to Annie an extraordinarily narrow, individualistic conception of personhood. She could scarcely have believed Fred is a group person.

But why think what twenty-first-century Annie believes about personhood is anything like what the ancients believed?²⁵ Are we really to imagine that there is no relevant epistemic distance between Annie and the ancients in this respect?

The crucial question, then, is this: were the ancients led to believe, by either just the individual Persons or the group God also, that God is the kind of person that *cannot* be a group person? The answer is that this is very unlikely indeed. It is not only likely that the ancients did not share our modern unduly individualistic conception of personhood, but it is not unlikely that they had a conception of personhood broad enough to recognize the existence of ‘corporate personalities’ akin to group persons. Further, even if it cannot be shown that they did in fact view God as a ‘corporate person’, we do not have evidence ruling that possibility out.

The ancients and corporate personality

The idea that the ancient Israelites not only had the conceptual space to recognize the existence of group persons but actually did so has been commonly accepted since the publication of an important pair of essays by H. Wheeler Robinson.²⁶ Robinson’s study of Hebrew anthropology led him to propose that they believed a group could ‘function as a single individual through any one of those members conceived as representative of it’ (Robinson (1980), 25). Hebrew thought, he argues, is suffused with cases where ‘the group possesses a consciousness which is distributed amongst its individual members and does not exist simply as a figure of speech or as an ideal’ (*ibid.*, 30). ‘Corporate personality’, as Robinson calls it, is thought to underlie such familiar Hebraic themes as iniquities being visited upon one’s descendants, blood guilt, Levirate marriage, holiness, and collective responsibility. According to Robinson, there are four salient features to the Hebrew concept of corporate personality:

- (1) the unity of its extension both into the past and into the future; (2) the characteristic ‘realism’ of the conception, which distinguishes it from ‘personification,’ and makes the group a real entity actualized in its members; (3) the fluidity of reference, facilitating rapid and unmarked transitions from the one to the many, and from the many to the one; (4) the maintenance of the corporate idea even after the development of a new individualistic emphasis within it. (*ibid.*, 27)

A brief review of how each of these features is present in the thought of the ancients is in order.

(1) That a corporate personality was believed to overlap past, present, and future generations is demonstrated by the importance of ancestral ties and Levirate marriage. The patriarchal narratives show that the Israelites thought of themselves *as* their ancestors and future lineages; families, clans, and tribes are ‘conceived realistically as a unity’ in Robinson’s words (*ibid.*, 28). This was made possible by the particulars of Hebrew anthropology. They believed that a man’s identity or personality was indefinitely extendable beyond his particular bodily locale, enabling him to be present at distant times and places through various peoples and objects.²⁷ A man was thought to be literally present at the evocation of his blessing, curse, message, or name; a man’s family and possessions were believed literally to

bear his personality. This helps to explain why, after Achan stole booty from Jericho, the booty as well as Achan's 'sons and daughters, his cattle, donkeys and sheep, his tent and all that he had' (Josh 7:24) were destroyed. This also explains how Israel could attribute their subsequent military defeat to Achan's plunder blunder: Achan's sin was *Israel's* sin. 'Examples of this kind', Aubrey Johnson summarizes, 'serve to explain the fact that any association of individuals suggestive of homogeneity, such as Jehu's confederate circle, a set of infidels, or even . . . the Babylonian pantheon, may be treated as a kin-group forming a single $\psi\psi\eta$ or corporate personality' (Johnson (1961), 8–9; footnotes omitted).²⁸ The lattermost example is instructive because, as Johnson goes on to argue in detail, it shows that the application of the concept was not restricted to human beings (more on this below). Hence prophets and Angels of the Lord are portrayed as real extensions of the Lord's personality, often speaking on behalf of Yahweh in the first person (e.g. Gen. 16:7–14; 18–19; Num. 20:14–21; Jud. 6:11–24; Jer. 9:1ff.).

(2) Here Robinson begins by citing Johannes Pederson's *Israel: Life and Culture*, where it is pointed out that an individual Moabite, *mō'ābhi*, was taken to represent the real type *mō'ābh*, a group personality. Robinson discusses similar examples where individuals represent corporate personalities, such as the unchaste woman of Ezekiel 16 and 23, the wife and mother of Isaiah 54:1ff., Gomer of Hosea, and, most intriguingly, the divine-human figure of Daniel 7. Of the lattermost, he writes, 'the human figure coming with the clouds of heaven is explicitly identified as the people of the saints of the Most High. This means that their unity is so realistically conceived that it can be concentrated into a single representative figure' (Robinson (1980), 29–30). One important analogue of this in the New Testament is Paul's conception of the Church as 'the body [$\sigma\omega\mu\alpha$] of Christ' (1 Cor. 12:27). The meaning of $\sigma\omega\mu\alpha$ here cannot be divorced from the Hebrew anthropology Paul inherited, which conceives of man not as an individualistic, private self, but collectively or holistically as bodily-organs/members-animated-by-breath/soul (Robinson (1909); cf. Robinson (1977)). So when Paul 'took the term $\sigma\omega\mu\alpha$ and applied it to the Church,' as John A. T. Robinson explains, 'it directed the mind to a person; it did not of itself suggest a social group' (Robinson (1977), 50–51). He continues:

Paul uses the analogy of the human body to elucidate his teaching that Christians form Christ's body. But the analogy holds because they are in literal fact the risen organism of Christ's person in all its concrete reality. . . . None of them is 'like' His body (Paul never says this): each of them *is* the body of Christ, in that each is the physical complement and extension of the one and the same Person and Life. (*ibid.*, 51)²⁹

Hence Paul says to the Galatian church 'you are all one person [$\epsilon\acute{\iota}\varsigma \acute{\epsilon}\sigma\tau\epsilon$] in Jesus Christ' (cf. 1 Cor. 10:17; 12:12; Rom. 12:5). Robinson in fact labours to show how the concept of $\sigma\omega\mu\alpha$ is the 'keystone' to *all* of Paul's theology and the body of Christ is its defining structure. The concept of corporate personality, wedded as it is to the concept of $\sigma\omega\mu\alpha$, is therefore just as foundational.

(3) The Israelite conception of corporate personality offers a tidy explanation for those otherwise odd cases when an author oscillates between plural and singular referents with no apparent concerns about inconsistency (e.g. Gen. 49; Deut. 29:1–5; Is. 22:15ff.). Sometimes this occurs with single terms like *a'dham*, which have built into them a plural–singular ambiguity.³⁰ At other times the author appears to switch abruptly from a plural subject to a singular one and back. Such transitions are apt to generate puzzlement among contemporary readers, who want to know whether the 'I' of the Psalms (e.g. Psalm 44) and the Servant of Yahweh in Deutero-Isaiah refers to a particular individual or metaphorically to a group. H. Wheeler Robinson answers that it is both, only the latter is not metaphorical. The psalmist cries out as himself and as the community; the Servant is both the prophet himself and the nation of Israel. Aubrey Johnson discusses still more putative examples in the Bible and in other Ancient Near Eastern texts.³¹ An especially clear example in the New Testament is the episode where Jesus confronts a man with an unclean spirit, who replies: 'I am Legion; for we are many' (Mark 5:6ff.).³²

(4) The final feature of corporate personality Robinson discusses is its persistence in Hebrew thought even after an increased awareness of one's own individual responsibility and relationship with God is apparent. This is because, to the Hebrew, morality and relationships in general were essentially social, defined by the ties that existed between those in the community and, even more importantly, between the community and God. The Jewish notion of the covenant is a clear reflection of this. A covenant is rarely (if ever) made with just an individual, but with a group; and not just a group physically present, but with future generations (e.g. Deut. 29:15; cf. Wilson (1989), 187; Kaminsky (1995)). Thus, Robinson:

[T]he fundamental conception of the covenant (*b'ērith*), which can be made the basis of a complete theology of the Old Testament, is inseparably linked to the conception of corporate personality. . . . We do not exaggerate when we say that Hebrew morality, and consequently Christian morality, are what they are because they sprang up within a society dominated by the principle of corporate personality. (Robinson (1980), 34, 44; cf. 51ff.)

As already mentioned, Johnson (1961) argues that Robinson's four features of corporate personality are found applied to divine beings also, plausibly even to the Hebrew conception of God. While important differences between their conceptions of God and man should not be forgotten (such as the corporeality of man versus the incorporeality of God; e.g. Job 10:4; Is. 31:3), the many parallels are equally important. It is indisputable that Yahweh was thought of in a 'strongly anthropomorphic fashion', where 'psychical functions of an emotional, volitional, or an intellectual kind are ascribed to Yahweh, as when he is said to be compassionate and merciful, to love, and to hate, to be angry', etc. (Johnson (1961), 13). Such parallels should not be surprising given the classic Hebraic conviction that man is made in the image of God.

This is most evident in their belief that Yahweh's personality, like man's, could be indefinitely extended in various ways, such as by the presence of His

messengers, blessings and curses, the invocation of His name, and the journeys of the Ark of the Covenant. More significant is the extension of Yahweh's personality through the Spirit and Word. Of the former, Johnson cites the example of the Spirit among the heavenly host that volunteered to help Israel defeat King Ahab (1 Kings 22:19ff.). 'In light of the Israelite conception of man,' he writes, 'it would seem that this רִיחַ, as a member of Yahweh's heavenly court (or Household!), should be thought of as an individualization within the corporate רִיחַ or 'Spirit' of Yahweh's extended personality' (Johnson (1961), 16). Of the latter, Johnson cites the example of Yahweh sending forth his Word into the world to beget a plentiful harvest among men (Is. 55:10ff.). 'The "Word" (דְּבַר) is one with the thing (דְּבַר) which is to be performed; it has objective reality, and thus forms a powerful "Extension" of the divine personality' (Johnson (1961), 17). A further parallel is the oscillation between the singular and plural perspective where divine beings are the subject,³³ such as when Yahweh (singular) is identified with the three 'men' or messengers that appear to Moses in Genesis 18–19 (cf. Gen. 3:22; 11:5ff.; Is 6:8). This plural-singular oscillation is also found in ANE writings contemporaneous with the Hebrew Scriptures. An especially intriguing example is taken from cuneiform inscriptions depicting *Ba'al* as a deity 'who is both three in one and one in three' (Johnson (1961), 29)!³⁴ Johnson closes by observing that the concept of corporate personality could furnish 'a new approach to the New Testament extension of Jewish Monotheism' (*ibid.*, 37). Such an approach is quite complementary to that of recent authors who argue that Paul, as faithful a son of Israel as there could be, had no difficulty incorporating Jesus into the *Shema* (1 Cor. 8:1–6) without compromising its meaning or abandoning monotheism.³⁵ Both H. Wheeler Robinson and Johnson draw from this the general lesson that 'psychology and theology move *pari passu*' (*ibid.*, 1).³⁶ If there can be a corporate personality made up of human beings in Hebrew thought, so, too, can there be one made up of divine beings.

To summarize, 'the modern concept of individualism', L. G. Perdue aptly states, 'was not known in ancient Israel and early Judaism' (Perdue (1997), 237). They and their first-century heirs, unlike us, were a collectivist culture.³⁷ Admittedly, the concept of corporate personality, particularly as put forward by Robinson, is not uncontroversial. Even so, it is safe to say that the ancients probably did *not* share Annie's narrow twenty-first-century beliefs about personhood, and that what they were led to believe about God is not what Annie was led to believe about Fred; i.e. that he is the kind of person that cannot be a group person. The ancients, unlike Annie, had the conceptual space to recognize the existence of group persons. Social Trinitarians should consider thinking more like the ancients than like Annie. Premise (1) of the divine deception argument is undercut, if not rebutted.

Conclusion

I will close by noting a more practical benefit to the present view. As Howard-Snyder points out, if God is not a person, Social Trinitarians must interpret all singular personal pronouns referring to God non-literally. There is no 'I' or 'me' from *God's* perspective, but only the individual Persons'. Nor is there a 'you', 'him', or 'he' that truly refers to *God*. This, I agree, is very unnatural to practising Christians; for Social Trinitarians to insist on linguistic precision in this respect – as Trinitarians are wont to do – would produce very awkward liturgies indeed. In truth, critics of ST are right to highlight the fact that God is naturally thought about and related to as *a* person. Group agency realism gives Social Trinitarians a way to acknowledge and respect this practice. Singular personal pronouns can be used to address and be addressed by group persons just as literally as they are when used to address and be addressed by individual persons. For example, we could say of Generals Grant and Lee that 'he [Grant] defeated him [Lee]', where it is understood that the pronouns refer to the armies and their generals, using the generals as representatives of the groups. Likewise, Grant could report to Lincoln 'I defeated him', Lincoln knowing full well that 'I' and 'him' refer collectively to Grant and his army and Lee and his army, respectively. Lincoln could in turn respond, 'Your valour and swift battlefield movements earned you success', where again 'your' and 'you' are understood to refer to Grant and his army collectively. Assuming armies (or least squads) can be group agents or persons, these pronouns need not be treated non-literally. (That some English pronouns are essentially gendered, it should be added, is merely an artefact of *grammar*; we need not understand gender literally in all cases where there is a literal personal referent.) A similar literal interpretation can be adopted with respect to personal pronouns referring to the ST God.

My purpose in this article is not to defend group agency realism or group personhood directly, but to make clear how a plausible application of those views, having been defended elsewhere, might be plausibly applied to ST. Social Trinitarians, I argue, have much to gain by viewing God as three intrinsicist Persons in one functional person: it is coherent, consistent with orthodox teaching, counters the objection heralded as the death of ST, is practically beneficial, and well-motivated by the biblical notion of corporate personality, be it applied to Israel, the Messianic figure of Daniel 7, the Suffering Servant, Christ's body, or God Himself. If Social Trinitarianism is dead, the 'God is not a person' objection is not its reaper.³⁸

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Notes

1. In his response to Tuggy's divine deception argument (on which see later discussion), Hasker (2009, 46–47) writes:
 I invite us first to consider the ways in which we do speak of collective bodies as though they were single individuals, such as 'the Management' of a corporation, or 'the Administration' of a college. It makes perfectly good sense to say that the Management knows all about so-and-so, or that the Administration has decided to do this or not do that. It is true that there are particular human beings who have known the relevant things or made the decision in question, but we may not know which individuals those are . . . These uses are, to be sure, analogical . . . , but they are none the worse for that.
 But, as Tuggy and other critics of ST are at pains to emphasize, they *are* the worse for that!
2. Hess (2014a) argues that groups can have literal beliefs and desires of their own on standard interpretationist, dispositionalist, and representationalist accounts. List & Pettit (2011) argue that the intentional states of an appropriately structured group 'holistically supervene' on the contributions of its members.
3. For the distinction between the two senses of responsibility, see Watson (1996).
4. On group agents being fit to be held morally responsible, see List & Pettit (2011, ch. 7). On group agents being the proper subject of reactive attitudes, see Tollefsen (2003), Silver (2005), and Hess & Bjornsson (MS).
5. Copp (2006) sketches a possible case; List & Pettit (2011, 167) and French (1984) discuss actual cases.
6. On group agents being morally responsible in the attributability sense, see Goodstopper (2007). Thanks to Kendy Hess for suggesting this book to me.
7. Hess, however, does not regard these capacities as sufficient for personhood. *Pace* Hess, I regard being morally responsible, having a rational, first-person perspective, and free will each as individually sufficient conditions of personhood. Hess (2013), however, does not regard these capacities as sufficient for personhood.
8. Part of what makes this seem absurd at first is the confused assimilation of self-consciousness, self-awareness, and having a first-person perspective with *phenomenal* consciousness or experience. But having a first-person perspective, etc. does not entail phenomenal consciousness or subjective experiences.
9. On reasons-responsiveness of groups, see Hess (2014b), 251–258; List & Pettit (2011), chs 2–5.
10. I see no reason to think family-resemblance concepts cannot have identifiable sufficient conditions. Compare the family-resemblance concept 'game': surely anything that is played for fun in one's spare time counts as a game.
11. The term 'intrinsicist person' is List & Pettit's (2011). They contrast intrinsicist persons with 'performative persons', which I am calling functional persons. The distinction is widely recognized, but how I go on to cash it out is my own.
12. If this is right, this gives insight into the difficult question of *why* an intrinsicist person is not the sort of thing a group *could* be. Perhaps the answer is as simple as this: intrinsicist persons are by nature *individuals*, whereas groups are by nature plural, composed of individuals. Thus, the idea that a group is or can be an intrinsicist person just seems confused: how can something that is essentially plural (a group) be something that is essentially individual (intrinsicist person)? Similarly, consider the paradigmatic example of an intrinsicist person: Descartes's *res cogitans*. Descartes also argued that a *res cogitans* is essentially simple, altogether lacking parts. An intrinsicist person is not the sort of thing a group could be because intrinsicist persons are essentially simple, whereas groups are essentially composite. I do not here wish to endorse the view that intrinsicist persons are essentially simple, but its relevance to the question is worth noting.
13. This is not to deny that functional persons have natures. Anything that properly belongs to the nuclear family of metaphysical personhood has the nature of a metaphysical person. But there is a difference

- between *having the nature of x* and *being x by nature*. My coffee mug can acquire the nature of a doorstep just by virtue of function. My coffee mug, however, is not a doorstep by nature.
14. One way to guarantee this claim is to interpret the 'in virtue of' relation here as one of ground, assuming, as is customary, grounding is transitive.
 15. For example, McKenna (2006) doubts there are *in fact* morally responsible group agents but is open to the possibility.
 16. The three divine Persons are not like a community of humans in that the former but not the latter are unified in a deeper, ontological or metaphysical, sense that would seem to *guarantee* not just epistemic but functional unity. Would 'any perfectly loving community always results in a group person?', an anonymous reviewer asks. The answer depends on the kind and extent of unity one thinks a 'perfectly loving community' entails. Not all communities meet conditions for group agency, much less group personhood. The epistemic and functional unity required for a group to meet conditions of agency is quite demanding, and that required for personhood even more so. I doubt that very large communities of human beings, even perfectly loving ones, could achieve the kind of epistemic unity required for joint action. There is more to cooperation than love! Even if a large community *could* achieve such unity, I see no reason to think it would necessarily organize itself in such a way as to become an agent or person.
 17. How and in what sense the ST God has the divine perfections the individual Persons have (omniscience, omnipotence, omnibenevolence, etc.) is a question all ST models must address. Critical discussion of this can be found in Leftow (1999). But it seems to me group agency can only help ST here. One concrete way of seeing how group agency makes a difference is by comparing an open theist group God with an open-theist unitarian God. Suppose two open theists, one Unitarian (Tugger, say) and one Trinitarian (Haskey, say), are arguing about whose God is superior in sovereignty and smarts. Haskey can appeal to the Law of Large Numbers to make his case. An implication of the Law of Large Numbers is that, on average, a group outperforms an individual at truth-tracking. A well-known example is of a contest among 800 participants to guess a particular cow's weight. While few participants guessed the actual weight of 1198lbs, the average guess turned out to be almost exact: 1197lbs. The group as a whole fared better than the vast majority of its individual members. Now compare the reliability of a three-membered group with the reliability of an individual. Suppose out of an infinite number of ten-question tests, an individual's average score is 90 per cent. The average score of a group of three such individuals over an infinite number of tests will be 97 per cent (assuming the group always chooses the majority's answer to each question). While an individual might at times score higher than the group, the group will always on average score higher than the individual. Thus, Haskey's God will be superior to Tugger's God.
 18. An intriguing view of divine freedom would be to see the individual Persons as free in a libertarian sense but the group person as free in a compatibilist sense. As for reasons-responsive mechanisms, Social Trinitarians have proposed various ways in which consistency among the Persons' beliefs and behaviour might be ensured, usually discussed in the context of the putative problem of whether there can be more than one omnipotent being. Suggested solutions to that problem are, in effect, suggested reasons-responsive mechanisms for the group God.
 19. Something that functions merely as if it were a person would not actually meet such conditions. Robots might illustrate the difference. As I see it, the most advanced humanoid robots of today function *as if* they were persons, having been programmed by an engineer to appear as though they meet conditions of personhood. But I see no in-principle reason to think robots cannot one day actually meet those conditions and become real (albeit functional) persons.
 20. Thomas McCall acknowledges that a model that distinguishes two kinds of persons could 'turn aside criticisms such as those of Howard-Snyder'. However, McCall doubts 'that an adequate defense of such a model could be pulled off'. See McCall (2010, 116–117). Arguably, David Brown's (1989) model of three conscious persons in one God who is self-conscious gestures in this direction. Despite describing God as 'a society [that] functions just like a person' (*ibid.*, 72), Brown stops short of saying God *is* a person because of quaternity worries. 'However,' he writes, 'I do not think much necessarily turns on the issue, provided of course that such a society is admitted to be a person in a very different sense of the word' (*ibid.*, 73).
 21. Even if God is necessarily or timelessly a group person it does not follow that God is essentially a group person.
 22. But there might be a related arithmetic concern. I am a person in virtue of my intrinsic nature, but I also meet sufficient conditions of personhood, such as being morally responsible, in virtue of function.

- Am I not, then, both an intrinsicist person and functional person? If so, are there also then no less than four functional persons in the Godhead? No. If I am a person (solely) in virtue of my intrinsic nature, I cannot also be a person (solely) in virtue of my function (and vice versa).
23. It is important to note that how we are to understand this 'true and proper unity' is left open by a group agency model of the Trinity. Is it mere functional unity? Is it some notion of *perichorēsis*? Do the Persons merely share a generic essence? Is it a stronger form of ontological unity, where the Persons are identical to, constitute, compose, or ground one substance? Does a single trope of divinity 'support' the three Persons? The group agency model does not pronounce on this.
 24. By 'the ancients' I mean, and I take it Tuggy means, the ancient Israelites of the OT, the believers of the NT, and their respective contemporaries; i.e. Ancient Near-Eastern and first-century Mediterranean peoples.
 25. Indeed, how could it be, when Annie's conception of personhood largely *grew out of* the great Trinitarian and Christological debates of the Patristic era?
 26. Originally published in 1939 and 1937, respectively. Published together in Robinson (1980). The ideas predate Robinson, but Robinson brought them to prominence. In the introduction to Robinson (1980), Gene Tucker observes that:

in some circles the idea of corporate personality continues to be used almost uncritically. That is, some seem to take it for granted that the concept is one of the assured results of biblical scholarship, and in turn use it in a variety of ways. In fact, some have used the concept as a foundation upon which to build theological structures. (Robinson (1980), 8; footnotes omitted)

As Tucker goes on to point out, Robinson has his critics, but I take it that Robinson's core proposals are entirely defensible and widely accepted. It is sometimes claimed that Robinson's view is a period piece all but completely abandoned on account of being based on Lévy-Bruhl's now defunct anthropological theories on primitive beliefs about personhood. But the extent of Lévy-Bruhl's influence on Robinson appears greatly exaggerated. Fair analyses of the dispute between Robinson and his critics can be found in Kaminsky (1995) and Mol (2009).
 27. This is not to suggest the Israelite anthropology had a neat division between soul and body. Interestingly, a contemporary analogue of this view may be found in extended mind theory. See Menary (2010).
 28. See also Johnson (1961, 1–10) for further discussion and examples.
 29. It is easy to take Robinson's point too far, as he himself might have. It must be acknowledged that identifying the Church as the body of Christ is in an important sense ineliminably metaphorical, as it is not in literal fact the selfsame body which was laid in the tomb and resurrected on the third day. The idea should be understood in line with H. Wheeler Robinson's first point, that Christ's identity or personality was understood literally to extend beyond the confines of his particular body to another concrete referent, i.e. the Church. For similar applications of corporate personality to Paul's theology of *soma christou*, see L. S. Thorton, *The Common Life in the Body of Christ* (Westminster, 1944); E. Best, *One Body in Christ* (London, 1955).
 30. For discussion and other examples, see Boman (1960).
 31. See, for instance, Deuteronomy 29:1–5, where Moses addresses Israel as an individual and as a group, as both himself and as a spokesman for Yahweh. For discussion, see Johnson (1961, 34ff.).
 32. One also thinks of Walter Wink's *Powers* trilogy in this connection, where he persuasively argues that the New Testament's oft-mentioned principalities and powers are more akin to corporate or institutional personalities than individuals. Although Wink leaves open the metaphysical status of corporate personalities, his point is clear: essential to the world-view of the NT authors and their contemporaries was the reality of social evil embodied in institutional and corporate form, not individuals. Thus, Ted Poston's 'Social Evil' is a recent (and welcome) philosophical spin on an old theological wheel.
 33. Not irrelevant is the controversial topic of the first-person plural pronouns used in Genesis's creation narrative. Despite being so controversial, there is widespread agreement that a plurality of divine beings is in mind. See discussion in Garr (2003), 17–21. Thanks to Joshua Schendel for this reference.
 34. The inscription (quoted in Johnson) reads, 'May the great gods of heaven and earth, the gods of Assyria, the gods of Accad, the gods of the land beyond the river, curse you with an indissoluble curse! As for Ba'al-sameme, Ba'al-malagê, Ba'al-sapunu, may *he* raise an evil wind against *their* own ships! May *he* loosen the rigging thereof! May *they* tear out the mast thereof!'
 35. I cannot go into this important literature here, but see Wright (1993), 115, 127–136; Hurtado (1998); Bauckham (2008).