

**RICHARD OF ST VICTOR'S ARGUMENT FOR THE TRINITY:  
PROSPECTS AND PROBLEMS FOR ITS APOLOGETIC USE**

Dennis P. Bray

Practitioners of ramified natural theology seek to defend core Christian doctrines without looking to scripture or church authorities for support, instead starting from publicly accessible sources of evidence.<sup>1</sup> Trinitarian argumentation is one major branch of the growing field of ramified natural theology, and a primary inspiration for most trinitarian arguments today is the 12<sup>th</sup> century monk Richard of St Victor's abbey.

Richard was an Augustinian canon who was deeply influenced by Anselm's prayerful tradition of faith seeking understanding. Richard believed that we come to knowledge of the Trinity through scripture and the teachings of the Church, and by grace we come to faith in the Father, his Son Jesus the Christ, and their Holy Spirit. Also, by grace we can be led into a deeper understanding of the Trinity. He believed that since God is triune and God is necessary, there are necessary reasons for why God is triune – and in his *De Trinitate* Richard sets out to explore some of those reasons. Richard's motivation is not to chart philosophical waters or to fully comprehend a God who, ultimately, deeply mysterious. Instead, as Richard confesses,

To be honest, in fact, knowledge is not that which pushes me to set forth in this attempt, but rather it is the fervor of my burning soul that impels me. What will it matter if I do not arrive where I desire and if my strength abandons me while I run? I will still be happy to have run, made an effort, sweated, always looking for my Lord's face.<sup>2</sup>

We find that Richard couples an ardent love for Jesus with intensive philosophical reasoning. Richard's goal in his trinitarian speculation is to encounter the triune God. The result is the most comprehensive argument to for the necessity of the Trinity to date. That argument can be summarized in four steps: First, he argues that God is supremely loving; second, that God's love entails two divine persons; third, God's love entails three divine persons; and fourth, God's love makes four or more divine persons impossible.

This kind of project finds a home in ramified natural theology, where Richard Swinburne, Stephen T. Davis, and (to a limited extent) Alexander Pruss have been inspired by Richard of St Victor in their trinitarian reasoning.<sup>3</sup> In philosophical theology, Swinburne, William Lane Craig, and recently William Hasker, incorporate Richard of St Victor's argumentation into their work.<sup>4</sup> Dale Tuggy and Keith Ward

---

<sup>1</sup> A good place to start regarding ramified natural theology is the themed issue of *Philosophia Christi* 15, no. 2 (Winter 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Richard of St Victor, *De Trinitate*, book 3, chapter 1, in *Richard of St Victor – On the Trinity*, trans. Christopher Evans (New York: New City Press, 2011), 247.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Swinburne, *The Christian God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 170–91; Stephen T. Davis, *Christian Philosophical Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 60–78; Alexander R. Pruss, 'Latin Trinitarianism and the Perfection of Love', *Alexander Pruss's Blog*, 2008, <http://alexanderpruss.blogspot.com/2008/04/orthodox-trinitarianism-and-perfection.html>

<sup>4</sup> Swinburne, *Was Jesus God?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, USA, 2010), pp. 28–38. J.P. Moreland and William Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 2017), chapter 31; William Hasker, *Metaphysics and the Tri-Personal God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 220–23. See also Thomas V. Morris, *Our Idea of God: An Introduction to Philosophical Theology* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2002), 174–84. I discuss much of this work in regards to Richard's thought in Dennis Bray, 'Richard of St. Victor's Argument

react strongly against these arguments in their (anti-)trinitarian thought.<sup>5</sup> On a more popular level, simplified expressions of Richard of St Victor's arguments are offered by Nabeel Qureshi, Frank Turek, and Ravi Zacharias. Muslim apologist Shabir Ally is perhaps the most outspoken critic of these sorts of arguments.

My goal in this article to help those interested in making arguments for the Trinity. Specifically, I want to show how Richard's work may usefully advance some contemporary trinitarian apologetic work. Richard's 12<sup>th</sup> century argument does not fully port over to contemporary philosophical or theological schemas, and I will investigate several areas where his argument poses concerns for current trinitarian apologetics.

It is beyond the scope of this article to give a full explanation of Richard's argument, much less a defense.<sup>6</sup> Instead, in part 1 I will articulate the main lines of argument for each step of Richard's case. This is meant to serve as a roadmap for a careful reading of *De Trinitate*, should the reader pursue further investigation of Richard. In part 2 I will investigate three ways Richard's work strengthens contemporary trinitarian argumentation. In part 3 I will then raise three difficulties contemporary apologists likely face in attempting to apply Richard's work. I will conclude with some thoughts on the general purpose and goals of Richard's project, and trinitarian natural theology generally.

## 1. Richard's trinitarian argument

- Step 1 – The divine, *a se* substance has supreme charity
- Step 2 – Supreme charity obtains between at least two divine persons
- Step 3 – Supreme charity obtains between at least three divine persons
- Step 4 – It is impossible for there to be four or more divine persons

In Step 1, Richard argues: (a) for the necessary existence of a single *a se* God; and (b), that the *a se* God has supreme charity. Let us look at these two moves in order.<sup>7</sup>

### *The single a se God*

To argue for a single, *a se* divine substance, Richard uses a variation on some traditional cosmological argumentation. He argues,

1. Every possible thing is either eternal or begins to exist in time.
2. Every possible thing either has its being from itself or from a source other than itself.
3. Therefore, every possible thing: (i) has its being from itself and is eternal; or (ii) has its being from a source other than itself and is eternal; or (iii) has its being from a source other than itself and begins to exist in time.

---

from Love and Contemporary Analytic Theology of the Trinity', *TheoLogica: An International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* vol. 6, n. 2, (2023).

<sup>5</sup> Keith Ward, 'Reimagining the Trinity: On Not Three Gods', *Philosophia Christi*, 18.2 (2016), 281–96; Ward, *Christ and the Cosmos: A Reformulation of Trinitarian Doctrine* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 179; Dale Tuggy, 'On the Possibility of a Single Perfect Person', in *Christian Philosophy of Religion: Essays in Honor of Stephen T. Davis*, ed. by C.P. Ruloff (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015), pp. 128–48

<sup>6</sup> For an explication and defence, see Dennis Bray, *Nichil Melius, Nichil Perfectius Caritate: Richard of St. Victor's Argument for the Necessity of the Trinity* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2025).

<sup>7</sup> The summary in this section is adapted from a more in-depth outline in Dennis Bray, 'Richard's Trinitarian Argument in *De Trinitate*: An Analytic Overview', in *Omnium Expetendorum Prima est Sapientia: Studies on Victorine thought and influence*, *Bibliotheca Victorina* 29 (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2023), 145–166.

Premise 1 is about causal explanation, *how* a thing comes to be. Premise 2 is about temporal location, *when* thing comes to be. Neither premise can be doubted because each fills the logical space it examines. For example, according to premise 1, every actual or possible object has either always existed, or begins to exist (and therefore begins to exist in time). Eternal existence and coming to be in time exhaust the logical space.

Likewise, according to premise 2, every actual or possible object is either uncaused, or something else causes it to exist. Any possible existent is either from itself (*a se*), or from another. There are no other options. We note carefully that for Richard, an *a se* object is not self-caused. This is because self-causation is impossible.<sup>8</sup> *Aseity* is not self-causation, but rather self-explanation: to be *a se* is to exist necessarily, without cause, and without reference to anything beyond oneself.

Premise 3 pairs the alternatives from premises 1 and 2, resulting in three possible categories of being: (i) *a se* & eternal; (ii) from another & eternal; and (iii) from another & begins to exist. The fourth option, *a se* & begins to exist, is impossible because the *a se* object would need to give itself existence before it exists.

Richard's trinitarian case is dedicated to arguing for the necessity of the first and second categories. To argue for the first category, that is, a thing which is *a se* and eternal, Richard asks his readers to consider experiences with the common objects of daily life. The vast majority of things are contingent, i.e., neither *a se* nor eternal. He reasons,

4. Contingent reality exists.
5. Necessarily, contingent reality has a cause.
6. If an *a se* and eternal being did not exist, then there would be no cause of contingent reality.
7. If there were no cause of contingent reality, then contingent reality would not exist.
8. Therefore, necessarily, an *a se* and eternal being exists.

Richard takes premise 4 to be indubitable since our most common experiences in the world are with things that are created and which possibly can cease to exist. Premise 5 is a modest use of the principle of sufficient reason, which holds that every possible thing is explained in one of two ways: it has a cause outside of itself; or it is necessary and uncaused. Spontaneous coming into existence without a cause is impossible.<sup>9</sup> Premise 6 is terse, and should be read as a statement about the ultimate explanation of contingent reality. While many objects have as their cause other contingent objects, the causal chain cannot continue infinitely. Thus, the causal explanations must terminate with an *a se* eternal being. Premise 7 is stated to help make clear the problem with denying premise 6: whoever denies 6 is committed to the existence uncaused contingent reality, which is impossible. With this, Richard concludes the necessary existence of an eternal, *a se* being.

Richard spends two books of *De Trinitate* arguing for key attributes of the *a se* being, who he identifies as God. As eternal and *a se*, God is the ultimate source of all other things. God has every quality that he gives, or could give, to created things (medieval thinkers refer to these as 'perfections'). As the ultimate source of all things and all possible things, God has existence and all perfections maximally.

---

<sup>8</sup> To see why, consider an object 'O', at some time 'T1', and at a later time 'T2'.

1. O does not exist at T1.
2. O exists at T2.
3. If O causes itself to exist at T2, then O must exist at T1.
4. Therefore, O exists at T1.
5. Therefore, at T1, O exists and does not exist.

Here we see the contradiction involved in the concept of self-causation, namely, to cause its existence, a thing must exist before it exists.

<sup>9</sup> Thus, on this philosophy of physics, gluons (quarks, etc.) do not spontaneously come into existence without a cause. If they come to be, they are caused by either physical or spiritual substance.

An attribute is had 'maximally' when it cannot be had in any greater way or degree. Thus, God lacks no good thing, God's goodness cannot be improved upon, nor can it be lost or subtracted in any way. Lacking no goodness, God is maximally happy, his joy and satisfaction cannot be increased or diminished.

### *God's maximal charity*

The metaphysical groundwork established above allows Richard to consider God's perfect charity. Richard argues,

9. Necessarily, God has every greatest perfection maximally.
10. Charity is a greatest perfection.
11. Therefore, necessarily, God has charity maximally.

Regarding 9, we have seen that, as the source of all things, God has all perfections. God has his perfections in different ways. For instance, he has some perfections by thinking them. God is neither brown nor feline; but God has brownness and felinity in his mind or imagination, and can therefore give these perfections by creating brown cats. God has some perfections actually –in the very act of being God. Goodness, beauty, divinity, and eternity are just a few perfections that God has in act, and not just in his mind. God has brownness and eternity, but God is not brown, though he is eternal.

Turning to charity (premise 10), Richard argues that it is one of the greatest perfections. Charity is other-love, i.e., the love shared between persons. While some other qualities may be as good a charity, there is nothing possibly better than charity. Why think so? Richard supports the claim by pointing out that nothing causes as much pleasure as loving someone and having your love requited by them. Richard will shortly examine charity in the arguments for multiple divine persons more fully. Before that, he examines an immediate concern with the argument so far, namely, the idea that God could have maximal charity with a created person.

One likely objection to Richard's project is that God could maximally share love with created persons. This divine-created instance of charity would satisfy the necessity for God's maximal charity (per 11, above); this instance of charity would also deflate the necessity for intra-divine maximal charity. Stated another way, if a divine person shares love fully with a created person, then there is no logical need for him to share love with another divine person.

Richard responds by deploying the notion of 'ordered charity': a person ('S1') loves another ('S2') perfectly only if S1's love is properly ordered to S2. There are several conditions of ordered love that we may highlight: (i) S1's love must be the correct type of love for S2 (S1 must love S2 as a person, and not as pet; if S2 is a co-worker, S1 must love S2 as a co-worker, and not as a parent or romantic partner); (ii) S1 must not love S2 more than S2 deserves (as a human person, S1 ought to love S2 with more love than he would give a mouse or a house, but with less love than he would give God).<sup>10</sup> In short, to be ordered, love must be commensurate for its object, it must 'fit' the thing loved.

With the notion of ordered love, Richard now argues against God loving any created person maximally,

12. If God maximally loved someone who is unworthy of maximal love, then God's love would be disordered.
13. It is impossible for God's love to be disordered.
14. Therefore, God could not maximally love a person unworthy of maximal love.

---

<sup>10</sup> Note the claim is *not* that different people deserve different degrees of love. The argument is only that humans should be loved as humans (and not something else).

15. A created person is unworthy of maximal love.
16. Therefore, God could not maximally love a created person.

The key premise here is 15, which claims that created persons, which includes humans, do not deserve maximal love. There is much to say in defense of this claim. Due to space I will only point out one aspect of love relevant here. Love between healthy adults (whether they are romantic partners, friends, siblings, or other types of relationships) includes the sharing of thoughts, emotions, and hopes. An instance of maximal love would involve sharing one's *infinite* mental life, affective states, and desires. A finite human person could not receive all this content from a divine person. But even if she could, it does not seem fitting for God to share with a human his complete thoughts and possibilities, joys and anger, desires and plans. God certainly loves humans perfectly, but he loves them *as humans*, and not as God. To do otherwise would be to treat us as more or as less than human, and thus love disorderly.

*Arguing for two divine persons*

In Step 2, Richard argues that, necessarily, there are at least two divine persons. Richard gives three sets of arguments each grounded in love. These are the arguments from goodness, happiness, and glory. We will summarize these very tersely.

*Multiple persons from goodness*

17. A divine person has maximal charity.
18. To have maximal charity, a divine person must love another as much as he loves himself.
19. A divine person's self-love is maximal.
20. Therefore, a divine person must love another person supremely.
21. Only a divine person is worthy of supreme love.
22. Therefore, a divine person must love another divine person.
23. Therefore, there are at least two divine persons.

We know from 11, above, that God has charity. Richard now argues that if a divine person does not share his charity, he is withholding something within his power to share. But such a withholding would be greedy, and not perfectly good. Alternatively, the desire to share and actually sharing is a great good, which is why a divine person would want to do so.

Next, Richard argues from happiness,

*Multiple persons from happiness*

24. A divine person is perfectly happy.
25. Maximal charity is necessary to be perfectly happy.
26. At least two divine persons are necessary for maximal charity: a giver of love and a receiver of that love.
27. Therefore, there are at least two divine persons.

Charity is a necessary condition for perfect happiness (premise 25) because the sharing of love is the most pleasurable, delightful experience possible. Premise 26 makes other-love explicit as part of charity.

Finally, Richard argues from the concept of glory,

*Multiple persons from glory*

28. If there is only one divine person ('DP1'), then he has no other with whom to share all his perfection.

29. If DP1 he has no other with whom to share all his perfection, then either DP1 is unable to share, or is unwilling.
30. DP1 is not unable to share all his perfection.
31. DP1 is not unwilling to share all his perfection.
32. Therefore, DP1 is willing and able to share all his perfection.
33. Therefore, DP1 shares all his perfection.
34. DP1 can only share all his perfection with another divine person.
35. Therefore, there are at least two divine persons.

This is an ancient line of reasoning used by Plato and neo-Platonists, and also used by Christian thinkers such as Origen, Athanasius, and the Cappadocians.<sup>11</sup> The key idea is in 29-31. If a divine person could not share his love with another, or did not want to share his love, then that divine person would not be perfectly glorious. That is, he would not be fully majestic, worthy of worship and emulation. Instead he would have cause to be ashamed since he would be impotent in some respect, or he would be greedy. But as fully glorious, a divine person is both willing and able to share all that he has with another in an act of maximal love.

#### *Arguing for three divine persons*

In Step 3, Richard uses the same notions of goodness, happiness, and glory to argue for the existence of at least three divine persons. Once again, we will very briefly summarize these arguments.

##### *Three persons from goodness*

36. Maximal charity is entirely perfect.
37. A person's desire that his beloved love another, third person, is a perfection of love.
38. Divine persons have maximal charity.
39. Therefore, DP1 desires that DP2 love DP3.
40. Therefore, there are at least three divine persons.

Recall that maximal charity is other-love which cannot be improved or increased. That is, divine charity lacks no excellent quality ('perfection'). Premise 37 central here and claims that a great perfection of charity is a lover's desire for a third party to be loved. Core to this idea is the intuition that something is wrong if two lovers never turned their attention, their lives, or their love outward to others. Even if S1 and S2 are a perfect husband and wife (or friends, siblings, etc.), if they *only* ever loved one another and totally ignored everyone else, then it seems as if they are lacking some good. But God is perfectly good, and so would not lack such a perfection as the desire and ability to turn love outward.

Next, Richard develops an argument from happiness,

##### *Three persons from happiness*

41. If there are only two divine persons, then neither has a partaker of his joy.
42. If neither of two divine persons has a partaker of his joy, then either (i) one or both cannot have a partaker, or (ii) one or both does not want a partaker.
43. But both i and ii are deficiencies (of divine power and goodness, respectively).
44. If a divine person was deficient, then the other person(s) would grieve.
45. But divine persons are supremely happy.
46. Therefore, both divine persons are able and willing to have a partaker of their joy.

---

<sup>11</sup> For an investigation of Gregory of Nazianzus' apologetic use of this argument, see Dennis Bray, 'Gregory Of Nazianzus' Trinitarian Argument in Oratio 23', *TheoLogica: An International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* vol. 4, n. 2 (2020).

47. Therefore, there are at least three divine persons.

At the center of this argument is the fact that a person experiences joy when their love is requited. For divine persons, when DP1 has charity with DP2, both share everything they can with one another. The result is that both DP1 and DP2 have joy. This joy is a result of their love, and so is not the love itself. The issue here is that DP1 and DP2 have something that goes unshared, which we have seen is impossible with perfectly good divine persons. That is, if a divine person did not share something he could share, he would be deficient in goodness or power. Such deficiency would grieve the other divine person; but divine persons are maximally happy, and so there is no deficiency. Therefore, Richard concludes that DP1 and DP2 must have someone else, DP3, with whom to share their infinite joy.<sup>12</sup>

Turning to the last argument,

*Three persons from glory*

48. If DP1 did not have the desire or power to join with a third divine person in loving DP2, then DP1 would have a cause for shame.
49. If DP1 has a cause for shame, then he does not have the fullness of glory.
50. But, necessarily, divine persons do have the fullness of glory.
51. Therefore, DP1 is able to join with a third divine person in loving DP2.
52. Therefore, necessarily, there are at least three divine persons.

The heart of the matter here is the desire to include others in love for someone. This idea about turning love outward has already been discussed, above. If a divine person was unable or unwilling to love his beloved with a third divine person, then he would have shame, another idea recycled from previous arguments. Divine persons have no shame because they are maximally glorious. Therefore, divine person is both willing and able to perform some action; and as omnipotent, he does so.

With these three arguments for at least three divine persons, Richard must now give reasons for stopping at three. Many thinkers – both for and against trinitarian arguments, and on scholarly and popular levels – mistakenly believe there are no such reasons. However, Richard gives two.

*Arguments for only three persons*

Richard has established that, necessarily, there are at least three divine persons. He now argues against the possibility of four or more divine persons from the notion of processions, and from the notion of love. He spends an entire book from *De Trinitate* on these two arguments alone, and so I can do no more than give the barest outline. Even so, these will be sufficient for the purposes of familiarizing the reader with the general lines of reasoning, leaving further investigation, explanation, and defense for a later time.

*Outline of main steps for argument against four persons from processions*

53. There is at least one, and no more than one, divine person who only gives being to other divine persons.
54. There is at least one, and no more than one, divine person who only receives being from other divine persons.
55. There is at least one, and no more than one, divine person who both gives and receives being from other divine persons.

---

<sup>12</sup> Saint Bonaventure gives an extended trinitarian argument from happiness. For a dedicated study, see Dennis Bray, 'Bonaventure's I Sentence Argument for the Trinity from Beatitude', *The American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* vol. 95, n. 4 (2021).

56. If there is a fourth divine person, he would either (i) only give being to other divine persons, (ii) only receive being from other divine persons, or (iii) both give and receive being from other divine persons.
57. But (i), (ii), and (iii) are impossible for a fourth divine person.
58. Therefore, it is impossible for there to be a fourth divine person.

Here Richard establishes that there is exactly one divine person who gives being to the other divine persons (however many there be). Similarly, there is exactly one who receives his being from the others, and exactly one who receives and gives being to other divine persons. Though we cannot look at Richard's arguments for these claims, the essence of the reasoning is that a fourth divine person would be identical to one of the other three. If there is a DP4, then DP4 is identical to DP1, DP2, or DP3. But this is just another way of saying that there *is* no DP4. Therefore, there are only three divine persons.

Richard works in a very similar fashion in reasoning against four persons from love.

*Outline of main steps for argument against four persons from love*

59. There are only three possible modes of other-love : (i) initiated, (ii) requited, (iii) both initiated and requited.
60. DP1 alone has, and is, only gratuitous love.
61. DP3 alone has, and is, only owed love.
62. DP2 alone has, and is, both gratuitous and owed love.
63. Therefore, it is impossible for there to be a fourth divine person.

Here Richard borrows much of the metaphysics and logic from the previous line of reasoning. One key addition is the idea that all love is either initiated, requited, or both. With this datum from common experience, Richard once again argues that each divine person is identical to his mode of loving. Any fourth divine person would be identical to one of the three modes of loving, and therefore would be identical to one of the three divine persons. In effect, then, it is impossible for there to be four divine persons (and if no fourth, then no fifth, etc.).

### **Prospects for apologetic use**

We have taken a whirlwind tour of Richard's trinitarian case. Our summary is so concise that it leaves out the many arguments Richard gives for his claims as well as his insights into the nature of love. Yet our goal is to get a feel for Richard's thinking, even if just in outline, so that we may see some potential applications and difficulties for use in contemporary apologetics. Toward that end, let us begin with some key strengths of Richard's project that makes it an asset for apologetic use, namely, Richard's argument is comprehensive, and it deals well with some major current objections.

*Richard's argument is comprehensive*

Richard's is the most thorough trinitarian argument on offer in the history of Christian thought. Richard gives reasons for: believing in the necessity of a single divine substance; for at least two divine persons; for at least three divine persons; and for no more than three divine persons. Further, Steps 2 through 4 provide more than one argument. These arguments are deductive, which means that the conclusion follows from its premise with logical necessity. Each argument is grounded in experience. For instance, Step 1 argues from common experience and obvious truths alone; Steps 2 through 4 argue by appealing to experience along with a conclusion reached in a previous step (a conclusion which itself is ultimately grounded in experience). Richard never appeals to scripture, individual

religious experience, or any other private source of evidence. Instead, all sources of support are in principle publicly accessible, and indeed are part of the common, human experience of everyday life.

The comprehensiveness of Richard's project presents several benefits for contemporary use. First, Richard gives us resources for defending a fully trinitarian view. Some contemporary thinkers argue only for multiple divine persons; others give reasons to believe in at least three divine persons,<sup>13</sup> but do not give reasons to limit the number to three.<sup>14</sup> Apologists have material to adapt for their particular needs at key points in trinitarian reasoning. Second, and related to the first, Richard argues for a thick trinitarian position. His project supports a robust doctrine of the Trinity, which includes: a single God that is three distinct persons; the persons are equal in eternity, value, power, and all other attributes common to divinity; the persons are distinguished by their acts of procession (giving and receiving the divine being), and by their acts of charity (giving and receiving love). These resources can be used in pro-active arguments for trinitarian doctrine or worldview, or in defense of the faith. That is, for anyone seeking to provide positive reasons for some aspect of trinitarianism, or seeking to secure it from philosophical critique, Richard gives a wealth of philosophical materials from which to draw.

### *Richard's project meets some major objections*

Another asset of Richard's work is that he has anticipated some of the main objections and concerns currently raised. For instance, one common concern on a popular level is that God could share love with creation, thereby satisfying the necessity for other-love, and removing the necessity for any other divine persons. As we saw above in the discussion of God's maximal charity, God cannot share full, perfect love with creation (premises 12 through 16).

Here we will examine two other common objections to trinitarian natural theology that Richard anticipates: that trinitarian arguments deploying love introduce need in God, and that it is possible to be perfectly loving without actually loving some other person.

The first critique is that Richard's argument somehow includes within the concept of God need or lack. This objection was raised vocally by the Thomist Maurílio Penido early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Penido argues that on Richard's view, God has a "Need for a friendly sharing to have the plenitude of happiness."<sup>15</sup> Penido explains,

No matter how much we try to assure ourselves that this need to have a being in whom we can pour ourselves out is not a dependence or a sign of poverty, but of superabundance, it remains that in strict metaphysics, even the splendid necessity to give oneself must be foreign to the plenitude of being: [God] is sufficient in himself.<sup>16</sup>

Penido, and other Thomist thinkers, see in Richard's argumentation an impoverished God, one who lacks perfection and is therefore in need of others to eliminate the deficiency. On a popular level, Muslim apologists raise this as a major problem for trinitarian natural theology. Abdullah al Andalusi from the Muslim Debate Initiative critiques William Lane Craig's argument at this location. Craig argues that it is part of the divine essence to love, and that the best expressions of love include love for another. Andalusi counters,

---

<sup>13</sup> Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations*, chp. 31.

<sup>14</sup> E.g. Swinburne, *Christian God*, 170–91.

<sup>15</sup> Maurílio Teixeira-Leite Penido, 'Gloses sur la Procession d'Amour dans la Trinité', *Ephemerides Theologia Lovanienses* 14 (1937), 33–68, at 49. (My translation).

<sup>16</sup> Penido, 'Gloses', 49. (My translation).

to say that God possesses an attribute that “*by His very nature, He must be giving Himself in love to another.*”, is to claim that God is IN NEED of something else other than his (absolutely indivisible) self. God cannot be in need to do anything, as he is uncreated and independent.<sup>17</sup>

For some Christians and non-Christians alike, trinitarian arguments from love appear to entail need or lack or impoverishment in God – some deficiency that drives God to be or cause multiple divine persons. But God has no such need or deficiency. Therefore, the arguments fail at a pivotal point.

Now, many objections like these equivocate on the concepts of ‘need’, and on the related concept of ‘necessity’.<sup>18</sup> Even so, in his expression of the argument, Richard does not reason along the lines of God needing or requiring another to be perfect.<sup>19</sup> Instead, Richard begins from God’s perfection, which explains why there are, already and eternally, three divine persons. We may make the point by comparing two general approaches:

Approach 1: If a divine person is perfect, then he *must* share his love with another divine person.

Approach 2: A divine person necessarily shares his love with another *because* he is perfect.

Both approaches are making the same point.<sup>20</sup> However, Approach 2 makes the explanatory steps more explicit. When we view Richard’s arguments for multiple divine persons (Step 2), or for three divine persons (Step 3), we find that he consistently begins with God’s perfection. A very general paraphrase would be something like, “God is supremely good, and the most good thing someone can do is share love with another”; and “God is supremely happy, and joining with a third person to love another is the most pleasurable experience possible.” This type of approach emphasizes that God does not have shared-love due to deficiency. Instead, God’s goodness is so rich that it always included three persons in mutual loving relations. Richard’s approach stands as a model for employing trinitarian arguments today.

The second critique is that perfect or divine love does not entail actually loving another person. This critique is usually expressed as a denial of the claim that perfect love involves or is love for another. The companion to this critique is the idea that a single divine person could be (or would be, or is) perfectly loving solely by loving himself.

A strong advocate of this critique is the Unitarian philosopher Dale Tuggy. Tuggy considers the proposition, “Necessarily, being perfectly loving entails actually loving another.” In reply, he asks,

---

<sup>17</sup> Abdullah al Andalusi, <https://abdullahandalusi.com/2013/04/02/the-fallacies-of-dr-william-lane-craigs-argument-for-the-trinity/>. (Andalusi’s formatting).

<sup>18</sup> The term ‘need’ finds itself in many conversations regarding necessity; and the concept of necessity is famously complex, with many types of necessity, including logical, metaphysical, nomological (laws of nature), psychological, bodily (such as the need for food and water). Each of these types of necessity have their own nature, and require special care if we are to avoid confusion. Take the sentence, “God must love another to be perfect.” The need or necessity involved here is not psychological, as when a child needs its mother to be happy; nor is it bodily, as when you need your morning cup of coffee to focus. In both of these cases, there is some lack denoted by ‘need’. The need involved in the above sentence is metaphysical. It is part of God’s nature to be perfect and to love another. Using possible worlds, we would say that God exists in all possible worlds, that God is perfect in all possible worlds, and that God loves another in all possible worlds. For example sentence, as for Richard’s argument, viewing need and necessity as connoting deficiency is mistaken.

<sup>19</sup> Again, even he did reason this way, as Craig does, the ‘need’ is metaphysical or logical necessity.

<sup>20</sup> For instance, the following sentence accurately expresses both approaches:  $\Box D \wedge D(p) \rightarrow D(l)$ . (Where D = a divine person; p = maximally perfect; l = maximally loving).

Why should anyone think it is true? *Perfect lovingness* is a character trait. Like other character traits, it may be had but not expressed; it doesn't imply being in an actual interpersonal relationship.<sup>21</sup>

On Tuggy's view, the disposition to love someone perfectly is sufficient for having perfect love, even if there is nobody else present or in existence for that disposition to be manifested. If Tuggy's intuition is correct, then actual other-love is not necessary for perfect (or maximal, or supreme) love. Tuggy correctly perceives that if it is possible for a divine person to be perfectly loving by merely having the (un-actualized) disposition to love another, then it is not necessary for that divine person to actually love another in order for him to be perfectly loving. Thus Tuggy's suggestion poses a possible defeater of Richard's case.

Contemporary philosophical trinitarian arguments seem to struggle against objections like Tuggy's. This is because simple appeals to intuition more readily support claims of possibility than claims of necessity. For instance, your interlocutor may agree that other-love seems better than mere self-love. Even so, without further steps or support, this intuition is small support for the claim that other-love is necessary for perfect love. Richard's trinitarian case, however, is highly resistant to critiques like Tuggy's.

First, Richard argues extensively for the nature of perfect love. He argues that maximal love lacks no greatest characteristics; maximal love cannot get any better. Self-love is a great characteristic, but greater still is love for another. In fact, though humans on earth never fully experience it, perfect other-love is something that cannot be topped. Richard, then, engages in careful perfect-attribute thinking before he turns to perfect-being argumentation. When he does look to God's perfection, Richard argues along several lines. For instance, we may restate his argument for divine plurality from goodness this way,

64. God is maximally perfect.
65. If God is maximally perfect, then God has every good for which nothing is more good.
66. Therefore, God has every good for which nothing is more good.
67. Nothing is more good than perfect other-love.
68. Therefore, God has perfect other-love.

Richard's intuition – like most people today – is that loving others well is a great good. By extension, loving and receiving love perfectly is a greatest good, one that nothing else can exceed. Since God necessarily has all the greatest goods, God actively and necessarily engages in other-love.

Recall that Richard gives two other arguments for the necessity of divine other-love. Since God's happiness is maximal, it has every greatest or happiest quality. But giving and receiving love is the one of these: nothing exceeds or is happier than sharing love. Similarly, God's magnificence is such that he has every greatest praiseworthy quality. Since nothing is more praiseworthy than loving others, God has other-love.<sup>22</sup> For all these reasons, it is not only necessary that a perfect divine person have other-love, it is also impossible that he *not* have other love.<sup>23</sup>

Some thinkers, such as Tuggy, deny that God must have all the greatest goods, or that God has maximal happiness. But this is a separate debate about open theism (Tuggy) and classical theism (Richard). For those who reject God's maximal goodness, such as open theists, the argument is not about love, but rather about what it means for God to be perfect. For those who accept divine maximality, such as

---

<sup>21</sup> Dale Tuggy, 'Antiunitarian Arguments from Divine Perfection', *Journal of Analytic Theology*, vol. 9 (Summer 2021), 262-290, at 263-264.

<sup>22</sup> Note that in all these arguments, Richard's claim is not that other-love is the *most* good, happy, or glorious. Instead, the claim is that nothing is more good, happy, or glorious. Some qualities may be equally good, happy, or glorious as other-love.

many Muslims, Richard's argument is a live option. We will say more in the next section about Richard's metaphysical and theological commitments, and how they present difficulties for sectors of modern audiences. The important point for right now is that Richard's argument is unphased by critiques of perfect love, or by suggestions that, possibly, divine love is merely an un-manifest disposition.

### **Difficulties for apologetic use**

Along with its potential contributions for contemporary apologetics, the unique structure and context of Richard's trinitarian case brings along several challenges. Here I will examine two, namely, its ontological-metaphysical commitments, and its difficulties posed by its thoroughness

One difficulty for apologists seeking to use Richard's argument is its ontological commitments. Richard employs a suite of metaphysical tools that were universally held in western medieval theology and philosophy, but which are not widely understood or accepted by many contemporary philosophers, much less by laymen. For example, Richard holds a Platonic metaphysics of participation that began losing popularity with Aquinas and was largely sidelined by Enlightenment metaphysics.

Another philosophical tool is divine simplicity, which is one of Richard's fundamental metaphysical devices. Stated roughly, the idea is that God is identical to God's qualities. For example, to be divine is not the having of the property 'divinity', but instead to *be* divinity itself. The same goes for God's power, goodness, wisdom, and other aspects of the divine being.

Simplicity does a lot of important work in Richard's arguments. It is introduced early in the argument for the existence and nature of the single divine substance, and it is used throughout the arguments for two and three persons. The arguments against four divine persons depend heavily on simplicity. Recall that the personal acts of intra-divine causation (i.e., the processions) are identical to the personal acts of love, and the persons are identical to their acts of causation and love. This allows Richard to eliminate the possibility of four divine persons.

One problem is that simplicity is not well understood by most laypersons today, and even many professional theologians and philosophers. To use the concept in an argument for the Trinity, the apologist must first do a satisfactory job of explaining it. This will involve giving a correct conceptual presentation which is at the same time intellectually appealing to the listener. Thus, along with making the case for the Trinity, the apologist must give an account of simplicity that is both accurate and convincing. Without philosophical training or some serious study, an effective and convincing presentation is beyond many.

Additionally, simplicity is problematic because many contemporary philosophers reject the idea. Many analytic philosophers, including Christian thinkers, deny the claim that God is simple. Open theists, some of whom reject trinitarian doctrine, also deny simplicity. So there is resistance to simplicity from both inside and outside the Christian camp. If simplicity is stripped away from Richard's trinitarian case, his arguments must be reformulated from the ground up. The changes would be so extensive that the reformulated case would no longer be close to Richard's own, but rather would be something entirely different.

Another likely difficulty for Richard's trinitarian case in apologetics is its comprehensiveness. We saw above that Richard's thoroughness presents several potential assets for apologist. Even so, that thoroughness also presents some liabilities. When it comes to cogency, several factors make it increasingly difficult to offer a persuasive argument. Let us briefly consider three: quantity of content, degree of specificity, and logical mode of argumentation.

The first factor is quantity of content. Each point or conceptual element in a conclusion must be supported in the argument. The wider a conclusion, the more work required to support that conclusion, and therefore more areas where the support is potentially insufficient. Richard's case is for a highly developed doctrine of the Trinity, along with a collection of metaphysical concepts that help hold the doctrine together. It is relatively straightforward to argue for the plausibility of multiple divine persons using intuitions about love and very little philosophical apparatus. Richard's project, on the other hand, includes a dozen or so primary conclusions that must be argued for, along with a host of sub-conclusions and metaphysical-conceptual tools. Taken as a whole, this package requires much more time and energy on behalf of its proponent and the listeners, thereby increasing the threshold for presenting a cogent argument.

The second factor is degree of specificity. Generally speaking, the more strict or niche a conclusion, the more difficult it is to convince interlocutors. The general claim 'junk food is harmful to your body' would likely be accepted by most; the more specific claim 'that cake in your hand is harmful to your body right now and will be for the next 48 hours' would require further explanation and defense to be persuasive. Richard's case is not only for key elements of trinitarian theology (such as a single divine being, and exactly three divine persons). In addition to all this, Richard argues for specific attributes of the single divine being (such as omniscience, omnipotence, supreme goodness, and much more), and specific relations that obtain between the divine persons (such as giving being/love, and receiving being/love). Finally, Richard's trinitarian doctrine is explicitly taken from the Athanasian creed. Once again, all these particulars combine in layers of specificity that gives the final product a high margin of difficulty in respect to persuasiveness.

The third factor is the logical form which the case takes. There is a fairly low bar for producing good (i.e. sound) inductive arguments and analogical arguments. Deductive proofs, though, are quite demanding, since each premise must be true and maintain proper logical connections to the other premises. Richard's many arguments, we have seen, are all deductive. Further, his conclusions maintain metaphysical necessity: Richard believes that his conclusions all obtain in every possible world. This yields a case for the *necessity* of *exactly* three divine persons in the one God; but it also requires extensive argumentation and support. There are many points at which Richard's argument could be attacked. If any premise is found to be weak, wrong, or even just possible instead of necessary, the whole edifice suffers.

### **Closing considerations**

Just a generation after Richard, the great Franciscan theologian, Saint Bonaventure, taught that trinitarian arguments serve three purposes.<sup>24</sup> First, they silence objectors to our faith, showing that the Trinitarian faith is not unreasonable. Second, they strengthen the weak in faith by showing how our worship of the triune God is reasonable. Third, they warm the hearts of the strong in faith, showing how the world testifies to the truth, revealed in scripture, of God's triunity. In other words, thirteenth century theologians realized that triadic natural theology has a rich apologetic role.

Richard's trinitarian case has contributions to make in showing that the doctrine of the Trinity is eminently reasonable. That is, believers have excellent philosophical support for their belief in the Trinity. The reality of the Trinity is a revealed truth: revealed most powerfully when the Father sent his Son on Christmas and his Spirit on Pentecost. Christians learn and believe in the Trinity because of scripture's powerful testimony and the triune God's work in our lives on a personal and corporate level. Trinitarian arguments cannot replace these critical foundations of faith. Yet arguments may

---

<sup>24</sup> Saint Bonaventure, *Commentary on Peter Lombard's Sentences*, prologue, question 2.

support our faith to limited, though important, ways. They are one approach for showing our faith is plausible, reasonable, and even necessarily so. But most importantly, along with Richard, they are ways that we seek and love our Lord with our minds. To close, in Richard's words, "Our starting point, our destination, and the steps of our ascent: by means of hope and love we ascend from faith toward divine knowledge." Thus, he enjoins his readers – I daresay even us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century,

Let us press on toward perfection; and, by what steps of progress we can make, let us hasten from faith toward knowledge; let us strive, insofar as we are able, to understand what we believe...Inasmuch as it is right and possible, let us always strive to comprehend with reason what we hold by faith.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> Richard of St Victor, *On the Trinity*, 209-210 (prologue).