

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Can the constitution be saved?

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Abstract

I reply to William Hasker's 'The Trinity as Social and Constitutional', continuing our debate over the use of the metaphysical concept of constitution to explicate the Christian doctrine of the Trinity.

Keywords: Trinity; constitution; Hasker; improper parts; words of desolation

William Hasker's 'The Trinity as social and constitutional' (Hasker, 2021b) uses the concept of constitution in an effort to understand the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. I first illustrate constitution. Then I discuss its analysis, and Hasker's remarks about Christ's words from the Cross.

Constitution

The illustration is well-worn: a sculptor moulds a hunk of clay, Hunk, into a statue, Athena. We tend to think that Hunk was there first and can outlast Athena. So we tend to think that Hunk is one thing, Athena another. Yet their relation is close. Hunk makes up or *constitutes* Athena. On Hasker's account of the Trinity, what he calls the divine soul or divine nature constitutes the Father, Son, and Spirit.

Hasker's definition

To explicate constitution, Hasker offers this:

Suppose x has F as its primary kind, and y has G as its primary kind. Then x constitutes y just in case

- (i*) x and y have all their parts in common at t ;
- (ii*) x is in G -favourable circumstances at t ;
- (iii*) necessarily, if an object of primary kind F is in G -favourable circumstances at t , there is an object of primary kind G that has all its parts in common with that object; and
- (iv*) in order for there to be an object of primary kind G that shares all its parts with x at t , a specific form of causal activity is required, the form of activity depending on the natures of F and G . (Hasker (2021a), 528)

(i*) includes improper parts (Hasker (2013), 243). This matters. The Persons and the divine soul have no proper parts.

The ice cube example

I have offered a counter-example to (iv*). Imagine a universe always consisting entirely of a cube of ice at absolute zero. Nothing is moving. So there is no causal activity, at least of the sort Hasker seems to envision. For here is what Hasker says:

in order for the constitution to occur, some causal activity is required . . . cloth must be coloured in the right pattern before it can constitute a national flag. The water must be frozen in a cubical shape in order to constitute an ice cube. The piece of paper must be signed by two individuals . . . in order to constitute a marriage licence . . . In most cases the causal activity will (modify) the constituting object, but (it) need not always . . . a piece of cloth already in existence (can come) to constitute a national flag as a result of an official action designating it as such. (Hasker (2021a), 527)

Hasker has in mind a macro-level change which makes an object that at first did not constitute another object come to constitute one. At absolute zero, no material thing moves. So no material thing does this. Souls might, even at absolute zero. To rule this out, I now add that this universe is stuck in the sort of ‘freeze’ Sydney Shoemaker described in ‘Time without Change’ (Shoemaker, 1969).¹ The quoted text suggests that immanent causation to preserve the cube’s identity would not be ‘causal activity’ in Hasker’s intended sense. If it would not, I can let it occur in my absolute-zero universe. If it would, add that ice cube identity is not preserved. Say instead that in this universe, there always exists without cause some ice cube indiscriminable from any prior ice cube. If the ice cube’s matter involves the strong and weak nuclear forces, or bends spacetime, or has parts linked by gravitational attraction, perhaps these too involve causal activity.² Again, it’s not clear that any of this is what Hasker means by causal activity. But if it is, we can just monkey with the universe’s physics again. (True absolute zero already takes us beyond what is actually physically possible.) It will still come out a metaphysically possible universe. In it, some water constitutes the cube. So there can be constitution without what Hasker means by causal activity, and without causal activity *tout court*.

Hasker claims that the counter-example fails because (on his analysis)

the constituted object must have causal powers the constituting object lacks, and in the all-ice universe there . . . would not be such novel causal powers, and thus no constitution.

In a more normal situation, the novel powers of ice cubes all . . . involve making or keeping something cold, so the constituting water must be . . . initially liquid, and constitution must involve that water’s being chilled below the freezing point – obviously, a ‘causal activity’ as called for. (Hasker (2021b), 557)

But ice has the power to cool even if there is nothing to cool. Powers can exist even if they have nothing to act on. Further, an object’s powers can be novel relative to its constituting matter even if both always exist. Ice as such has powers some water as such does not. Nor need an ice cube first be liquid. For if it must be, even God can only make an ice cube by first making non-frozen water and then freezing it. Making an ice cube appear at time’s first

instant is as impossible as making a square circle. If time cannot have a first instant, then Hasker's view implies that God could not make an ice cube exist for all time before some arbitrary time. But first-instant and pastward-everlasting ice cubes are robustly conceivable. There is no countervailing modal evidence. So I think both are possible. So I think Hasker's attempt to evade the example fails. Further, Hasker's move has Trinity trouble. Both Hasker's reply and his initial examples suggest that we have constitution only when first something was not constituted, and then something made constitution come about. That applies to the Trinity only if first the divine soul did not constitute the Persons, and then it did. If this is the case, the divine soul might be eternal, but the Persons are not.

Sharing parts

Let's now take up (i*). Nothing in the Trinity has proper parts. So the Trinity satisfies (i*) only if (i*)'s full expansion somehow covers improper parts. Fully expanded, (i*) might be

1. $(z)((z \text{ is a proper part of } x \equiv z \text{ is a proper or improper proper part of } y) \wedge (z \text{ is an improper part of } x \equiv z \text{ is a proper or improper part of } y))$.³

On the other hand, suppose that we introduce a generic parthood relation P, in terms of which we could define both proper and improper parthood. Then we could take (i*) as

2. $(z)(Pzx \equiv Pzy)$.

But if 'P' is really a disjunction of proper and improper parthood, our understanding of (2) is parasitic on our understanding of (1). (2) is then just a disguise for (1). It makes no progress on it. Definitions of proper and improper parthood in terms of it (Leftow (2021), 535) might make things more elegant formally, but don't really define them in terms of something more fundamental. I think 'P' must be disjunctive down deep, as I do not think we really have any such generic, undifferentiated part-notion (*ibid.*, 535–536). So I think (i*) has to come to (1) in the end.

Improper parts

I raised a number of questions about how Hasker understands improper parthood. Hasker has two replies – that he can do without it, and an account. The account emerges from a discussion of one simple entity constituting another. Hasker asks,

what is the relation between a simple entity and its sole, improper part? . . . it is . . . disjunctive: a simple object is either identical with its sole part, or is constituted by another simple object, which is the sole, improper part of the first object. (Hasker (2021b), 558)

Hasker says that if simple B constitutes simple A, A is not an improper part of A. Only B is. Identity confers improper parthood on A only if nothing constitutes A. This is unintuitive. $A = A$ whether or not A is constituted. Identity can suffice for improper parthood. If it can, I do not see why it would ever not suffice. But let's be irenic. Hasker can stipulate whatever use he pleases for 'improper part'. It is after all a term of art. Whatever the merits of Hasker's usage, it renders Hasker's definition of constitution circular. On Hasker's new story, constitution comes into the definition of improper parthood. So if (i*) is really (1), a definition of constitution containing (i*) is formally circular. On the other hand, suppose that (i*) is really (2), and (2) somehow manages to be something other than (1) *au*

fond. Even so, it seems to me, our understanding of (2) will be parasitic on our understanding of (1). This renders our understanding of Hasker's definition circular even if the definition itself (taking (i*) as (2)) is not formally so.

Doing without improper parts

Hasker's attempt to do without improper parts substitutes for (i*) a requirement that constituting and constituted spatially coincide (Hasker (2021b), 558). Suppose that there can be 'thick', non-conventional cases of one item constituting another. Then plausibly, this can happen without spatial coincidence. Consider a Cartesian soul, with no spatial location. If it has none, nor do its thoughts. Events can constitute events; a referee's raising his arms can constitute his signalling 'touchdown'. This applies to mental as well as physical events. Imagine one telepathic spy signalling another in code. The signaller thinks, 'it's raining in Pittsburgh'. This could constitute signalling 'the KGB is closing in on you – time to move'. Or suppose I have had a post-hypnotic suggestion implanted, so that when I think 'Lincoln thinkin', I remember the entire Gettysburg Address. Then my thinking that could constitute my unlocking my memory. These cases are all possible if I'm a physical object. But on Hasker's account, if I'm a Cartesian soul, they are not. My make-up should not make a difference.

I now turn to another point. Hasker thinks that the Persons and the divine soul spatially coincide because they are all omnipresent (Hasker (2021b), 558). But divine omnipresence may not involve literal spatial location at all. This might in fact be so on Hasker's own account of it. Hasker says just this:

omnipresence involves both complete awareness of everything that exists and occurs at any point in space, and the capacity to act at any point in space. (It is controversial whether God is present in space in God's essence, but that need not be decided here.) Furthermore, God is present everywhere in space without a part of God being present at each point in space. (*ibid.*)

Complete awareness and capacity to act do not suffice for literal spatial location. I think my body's boundaries are my boundaries. Where it is not, I am not. I now occupy space only in America. That is where I am – nowhere else. But while my body is in America, I could be 'completely aware of everything that exists' in Europe if I had strange mental powers. I could also be able to 'act at any point in' Europe if I were powerfully telekinetic. This would make me present in Europe, on Hasker's account of God's spatial 'presence'. For if God is present everywhere by being completely aware of everything everywhere and able to act (immediately) everywhere, having these relations to smaller regions would confer presence in those regions. (God's presence everywhere *consists of* His presence to smaller regions.) But I am not located in these other places. If I acquire my strange powers at *t*, after *t* I am not larger than I was. I would be larger had my spatial boundaries expanded. They would have expanded had I come at *t* to be located in Europe as well as the United States. So presence in Hasker's sense does not seem to confer spatial location. If not, it's not enough for spatial coincidence. For spatial coincidence is having the same spatial location.

However, suppose that Hasker's account somehow does confer spatial location, or suppose that spatial presence in the same regions in Hasker's looser sense somehow counts as a kind of spatial coincidence. Either way, it's not clear that Hasker can provide that his 'divine soul' spatially coincides with the Trinitarian Persons. For Hasker, the Persons coincide spatially only because their knowledge and power relate them to the same places. Hasker's divine soul is not supposed to be a knower. Only the

Persons are. If the divine soul has its own knowledge, there are four minds in the Trinity. There are supposed to be at most three. Again, Hasker's divine soul is (he says) the source of the Persons' powers. But it is the Persons, not the soul, who have those powers. If the soul also has the powers, there are in the Trinity four irreducible agents, not three.⁴ If the divine soul has no knowledge and power of its own, it is not itself omnipresent, on Hasker's account. So it does not spatially coincide with the Persons. So it cannot constitute them, on Hasker's account.

Hasker could reply that the divine soul knows through and only through the Persons' knowing, and has power through and only through their having power. But this leaves four irreducible agents. One has knowledge and power derivatively, but it does not as an entity reduce to the other three. Further, we must then ask what makes it the case that the soul knows and has power through the Persons' knowing and having power. The only available answer, I think, is that this is because the soul constitutes the Persons. But then constitution has come into our account of what satisfies Hasker's new substitute for (i*). It turns out that the soul constitutes the Persons *inter alia* because the soul constitutes the Persons. Once again, we have circularity.

Hasker could try again with the claim that the divine soul knows and has power only *in the sense* that the Persons know and have power by means of it. But then we would again have to ask what makes this so. Again, the answer would be that the Persons know/have power by means of it because it constitutes them. So again, it would turn out that the soul constitutes the Persons *inter alia* because the soul constitutes the Persons. Further, the divine soul would be omnispatially located only in the sense that the Persons are omnispatially located by means of it. I'm not sure this would really confer spatial location. Suppose that universals are not immanent, but transcendent. They do not exist in their instances, or where they are. Suppose too that there is a universal *having a spatial location*. Then everything with any spatial location has a spatial location by means of that universal – by exemplifying it. But it is not omnipresent. That there are universals and they are transcendent is a perfectly respectable philosophical thesis. So is the claim that properties are abundant enough to include *having a spatial location*. So at the least, it is thoroughly in the realm of philosophical respectability to hold that this last attempt on Hasker's behalf does not confer spatial location.

Hasker adds that the Persons and the divine soul would be omnipresent even if there were no space, only vacuously so (Hasker (2021b), 558 n. 4). A lot turns on this. For there need not be space. So without this addition, the divine nature/soul would on Hasker's proposed revision only contingently constitute the Persons. There is no orthodox way to construe that. But with the addition, in a spaceless world, all abstract entities are also omnipresent. There is no place they are not located, because there is no place, period. There is no place they are not (as there is no place at all), and so they count as everywhere. Thus in such worlds, all abstracta also spatially coincide with the Trinity. Neither the omnipresence nor the coincidence is plausible, even if we remind ourselves of why we're asserting them. Hasker might reply that coinciding with the Trinity is OK because the coincidence is trivial and vacuous. If he did, it would be reasonable to ask whether the nature's constituting the Persons is also partly trivial and vacuous if there is no space. It should not be.

I submit, then, that Hasker's attempt to do without (i*) fails, and on his new account of constitution, (i*) involves him in circularity.

My account of constitution

My own account of constitution is deflationary. I think the relation never links objects none of which are mind-dependent in the way artefacts are, conventional, or in some

other way socially constituted.⁵ If we prescind from the Trinity, then wherever the constitution-relation links things, one is mind-dependent, conventional, etc. Where no ‘things’ it links are so, there is really only one object there. If this is so in all non-Trinitarian cases, it seems unlikely that there would be one grand exception. It would be a dialectically weak position to insist that there is.

Hasker asks how my deflationary view is supposed to ‘put constitution out of business’ (Hasker (2021b), 555). In a way, it isn’t. I allow (deflated) cases of it. I mean to show its nature, and what it can and can’t do. I argue that on plausible, appealing accounts of all its possible non-Trinitarian cases, the constitution-relation never links distinct objects none of which are mind-dependent as artefacts are, conventional, or otherwise socially constituted. Suppose one called the Trinity the one possible exception. That would invite the question of why we should think that there can be any, if this happens in no other possible case. That question is what I think puts constitution out of business in *Trinitarian thought*. Further, if I’m right, I may indeed put constitution out of business altogether. Suppose one accepts that as I say, all genuine cases of constitution are just minds treating some independent stuff or thing a certain way. Then one may start to suspect that constitution isn’t really a ‘thing’ – that if we told the history of the universe in terms of mind- and socially independent things (etc.), never speaking of constitution, we wouldn’t really be missing anything.

Hasker thinks that constitution does link independent objects outside the Trinity. He thinks that when some water constitutes an ice cube, there are two such objects – a quantity of water and the cube (Hasker (2021b), 555–556). It is debatable whether quantities of water are independent objects. Mereological universalists may think so. Others may not. But suppose they are. Ice cubes may be like statues, metaphysically. Both may be by nature artefacts. If a lightning bolt blasted an Athena-shaped chunk of rock from a mountain, it wouldn’t be a statue. Statues are by nature artefacts. If there is a statue, someone made it. Perhaps an ice cube is relevantly like an ice statue of a cube. Suppose that a lightning bolt blasted a cubical chunk of ice from a glacier. If ice cubes are by nature artefacts, it would not be an ice cube. If we found it, we could use it as one. But equally, if we found the blasted Athena-chunk, we could use it as a statue. In short, perhaps an ice cube is matter deliberately shaped, as statues are. If so, we settle what counts as an ice cube conventionally. The convention does not actually require a cubical shape. Some call chunks of ice shaped like little barrels ice cubes. No one objects, ‘wait! They’re not cubes! So they’re not ice cubes!’ The little barrels satisfy our conventions well enough. They are artefacts manufactured to cool things, consisting of ice, of a size that lets many fit comfortably in a drink glass, etc. So they’re ice cubes.

Now suppose ice cubes are *not* by nature artefacts. Suppose that Blasted Cube is indeed an ice cube. That’s still a matter of convention or social construction. A twenty-ton block of ice is not an ice cube even if it is perfectly cubical. Without the artefact condition, that’s just because it’s too big for us to use as one. It can’t serve the purpose we have for ice cubes. It doesn’t fit into our ways of life that way. So it’s not one. But it might be one if we had the habit of sipping cola from gigantic swimming pools full of it. Our habits and their associated conventions still settle what things are and aren’t ice cubes. So either way, ice cubes are ontologically lightweight – merely conventional objects. So Hasker’s example fails.

Bible matters

Finally I come to Hasker’s treatment of my own view, and Christ’s words of desolation from the Cross (‘My God, why have you forsaken me?’). I model the relation between God and the Persons, and between the Persons, on some aspects of a time-traveller’s relation to past or

future versions of him/herself. If I time-travel back to visit my past self, I in one part of my life may speak to myself in another part of my life. There are two of me present, earlier me and later me. I have suggested that God's life eternally runs in three discrete streams. God does not 'time-travel' between streams. He is just always living three parts of His life at once, as time-travelling me and my earlier self live two parts of my life at once.

Hasker has written that on my view, Jesus' 'My God, why have you forsaken me?' amounts to 'Why have I-as-Father forsaken myself-as-Son?' (Hasker (2021a), 560). But in the same way, for Aquinas, it amounts to 'why has the divine nature plus an individuating relation forsaken itself plus a different individuating relation?' One can do this for any metaphysical account of the Trinity. No matter what that account is, Jesus is not plausibly taken to be expressing it. Hasker might, however, mean to suggest that there is something *especially* off about translation into my account's terms. Hasker now writes:

Previously, Leftow had written, 'It should not seem odd to us that someone would feel that he had forsaken himself if he was not aware that it was he himself who (he felt) was doing the forsaking' . . . Here Leftow appears to concede that Jesus 'was not aware that it was he himself who (he felt) was doing the forsaking' – that is, that Jesus was not thinking of himself in terms of the trinitarian model proposed by Leftow. Jesus at some time . . . might not have been fully aware of the nature of his relationship with the Father . . . But this utterance from the Cross comes at the very end of Jesus' earthly life, and therefore at the very end of whatever process of development may have occurred in his self-awareness. . . (So) on Leftow's own account, we have a disagreement between Jesus, at the very end of his pre-crucifixion life, and Leftow (about) Jesus' relationship with the Father . . . This sets the scene for the new response in Leftow's most recent defense:

[I]n claiming that Jesus' pre-mortem view was distinct from mine, Hasker claims quite astonishing insight into Jesus' mind, and in particular, knowledge that Jesus at that point clearly distinguished persons from Persons (as I used those terms . . .), and thought of the Father as a distinct person, not a distinct Person . . . I feel some incredulity at Hasker's apparent thought that He had such niceties in mind while dying in torment . . .

So far from my attributing to Jesus a clear distinction between persons and Persons, there is not a shred of evidence that Jesus had any inkling of the concept of a trinitarian Person as Leftow defines it . . . If, then, Jesus did not possess Leftow's concept of a divine Person, it is impossible to offer such a concept as a possible interpretation of Jesus' words, as Leftow wants to do . . . Throughout the Gospels, we see Jesus speaking and relating to the Father as to another Person . . . Jesus was absolutely unconfused at this point: he thought of the Father as a person distinct from himself. (*ibid.*, 560–561)

OK. Deep breath. Here goes.

That the Crucifixion is at the end of Jesus' pre-mortem life does not imply that He is or is not consciously aware of any particular thing about His relationship with the Father. One can make progress, but end up well short. For that matter, Jesus, working through His human brain, may not have moved in only one direction on this or any other topic. Any human may 'get it' in a moment of insight, then forget, or at least for a long while not think of it again. For that matter, dulled by fatigue, or with pain blasting away, any human may not even be able to comprehend what once seemed transparent.

Jesus was fully human. He got tired. He felt pain. So there is nothing particularly odd in the thought that at the end of His pre-mortem life, on the Cross, Jesus was not consciously aware of all facts about the Trinity – even if at some earlier times, He seems aware of some.

In an earlier essay, as Hasker notes (2021a, 560), I had suggested the following. I time-travel. I visit my earlier self, not revealing who I am. I make to leave. My earlier self says to me, ‘why are you forsaking me?’, not realizing that the one leaving is himself. In my last contribution to this exchange, I added that if my earlier self *did* know it was me, he might still ask this question, put just this way. Think about it: if earlier me knows, will he say ‘Why am I leaving me?’, or ‘why are you leaving me?’ ‘You’ makes better sense when addressing someone across the room. Hasker’s latest, just quoted, ignores my addition. But given this addition, the words of desolation could be exactly as they were even if (improbably) Jesus was then consciously and fully aware of all Trinitarian niceties, and I was right about all of them. Thus there is just no way from the biblical text to any claim that Jesus then disagreed with my view. Nor does it tell us that He agreed. The biblical text underdetermines what was in His mind.

Hasker writes: ‘If . . . Jesus did not possess Leftow’s concept of a divine Person, it is impossible to offer such a concept as a possible interpretation of Jesus’ words, as Leftow wants to do.’ I did not offer an interpretation of Jesus’ words in my terms. Hasker did. I did not claim that Jesus meant to express my metaphysics of the Trinity. Nor did Aquinas claim that Jesus was thinking in terms of ‘subsistent relations’. What Jesus said is one thing. The right metaphysical analysis of what He said operates on a different level. Any metaphysical analysis implies a metaphysical ‘interpretation of Jesus’ words’ which is not anything Jesus plausibly had in mind just then.

Hasker had said earlier, and now repeats, that Jesus thought of the Father as a distinct person, and not as a distinct Person in my sense (i.e. one God in distinct streams of His life). In a way, that’s true. It’s equally true that He was not thinking of the Father as a distinct Person in the way Hasker himself metaphysically construes that concept (the divine soul operating through a particular set of rational faculties to produce a particular divine life-stream). Jesus wasn’t doing metaphysics on the Cross. The thought that He was, was what evoked my ‘incredulity’ in the text Hasker quotes. Hasker has written that as Jesus treats the Father simply as a distinct person, there are ‘two incompatible views concerning Jesus’ relation to the Father – Jesus’ view, and Leftow’s’ (Hasker (2021a), 530). Incompatible? Suppose that Jesus thinks of the Father as another person. He is then using the ordinary concept of a person. My ‘concept of a Person’ consists of the ordinary concept of a person, a note to modify it in whatever way we must to apply it to God, and a particular metaphysics of God’s life. It is a metaphysical precisification of an ordinary concept. The ordinary concept is indeterminate as to the metaphysics that underlies cases to which it applies. This is why philosophers with different metaphysics of persons – for example, endurantists and perdurantists – can talk to each other in ordinary language without confusion. So too, the ordinary concept of the different-person-from relation is indeterminate in relation to the metaphysics that underlies its cases. In particular, it is indeterminate in relation to the metaphysical precisifications that occur in Trinitarian theology.

Precisifications are not incompatible with the vaguer concepts they render precise. Whatever falls under the precisification also falls under the concept it precisifies. (One could treat vague predicates as disjunctions of perfectly precise ones.) To be disagreeing with my view, Jesus would have to have had a view operating on the same level as mine – a metaphysical analysis, not just the deployment of an ordinary vague concept. Suppose that I say to Boethius ‘you’re a distinct person from me’, and Boethius replies, ‘I’m a distinct individual substance of a rational nature from you.’ We haven’t disagreed. He has

agreed with me, as far as what I say went. He has also added further thoughts which I have neither affirmed nor denied. For me to be disagreeing with Jesus, He would have to have meant to exclude my analysis of what a Person is. That is, as I said, He would have to have 'clearly distinguished persons from Persons (as I used those terms), and thought of the Father as a distinct person, not a distinct Person.' If He wasn't thinking about metaphysics, He could not have done that. What Jesus said and plausibly thought on the Cross neither affirms nor denies any particular metaphysics of the Trinity.⁶

Notes

1. Dean Zimmerman suggested this.
2. So Daniel Berndtson and others, in discussion.
3. My thanks to Daniel Berndtson for discussion here. I put (1) in this form to allow people with somewhat differing views of proper and improper parthood to agree on it. If one were convinced that improper parthood is just identity, one could replace (1) with the simpler (z)((z is a proper part of $x \equiv z$ is a proper part of y) \wedge (z is an improper part of $x \equiv z$ is an improper part of y)).
4. If the Trinity counts as an agent, its agency reduces to the Persons', on Hasker's picture. So it does not give us too many irreducible agents.
5. This commits me to the claim there is no such thing as the mass of cells or particles that makes animals up. That's fine with me. The cells and particles can do their work as pluralities.
6. My thanks to the Rutgers Philosophy of Religion Reading Group for discussion.

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