

# Love and the Necessity of the Trinity

Subjects: Philosophy

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A reformulation of the argument from love is made by proposing a novel version of the argument that is situated within an objective, empirical, natural theological framework. Reformulating the argument in this specific manner will enable it to ward off an important objection that is often raised against it, and ultimately render this argument of great use in establishing the necessity of the Trinity.

Keywords: love ; trinity ; necessity ; essentialism ; a priori ; a posteriori

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## 1. Introduction

According to Richard [Swinburne](#) (1994, 2018), there is a cogent *argument from love for the necessity of the doctrine of the Trinity*—which we can term the ‘Love Argument’. The doctrine of the Trinity (hereafter, the Trinity) is the Christian teaching that posits the existence of three persons (Greek: *hypostases*), who are each equally divine through them sharing in the one divine nature (Greek: *ousia*). In Swinburne’s thought, who follows in the footsteps of the 12th century medieval theologian Richard of St. Victor,<sup>1</sup> if there exists a solitary divine person, defined as an essentially everlastingly omnipotent person, then one can know *a priori* that it is necessarily true that this divine person will everlastingly generate two other interdependent divine persons—in order for him (and them) to exemplify perfect love. Perfect love, for [Swinburne](#) (2018), is a love that has at least two characteristics: *mutuality* and *unselfishness*. Thus, in order for this type of love to be exemplified by the solitary divine person, there *must* also exist a minimum of two other persons of equal status (i.e., two other divine persons). Given this requirement, the existence of the Trinity is thus a necessary truth.

Unpacking this further, we can see that, for [Swinburne](#) (2018), perfect love would, firstly, be a *mutual* love, in the sense that it is a good state of affairs for a being to mutually give to another what is good for them. Thus, mutual love involves the total sharing of one’s self with another equal by reciprocally giving all that is good for oneself to the other—as in a perfect marriage—which would produce a love that is reciprocated in quantity and kind ([Swinburne 1994, p. 177](#)). Secondly, perfect love would also be an *unselfish* love, in the sense that it would be a bad state of affairs for a twosome to be solely focused upon their interests, and thus having no desire to spread the love that they have for each other with another being ([Swinburne 2018, p. 16](#)). The unselfish nature of love—unlike what would be found within a deficient marriage—would, therefore, involve the co-operation of the twosome in seeking to benefit others. Furthermore, the twosome would seek the good of each other by finding a third person for them to love and be loved by—such as it is found in a couple seeking to extend their family through procreation ([Swinburne 2008, p. 31](#)). Thus, at a more general level, this would be that of the first being co-operating with the second being to further share all that is good for them with a third equal being. Perfect love would thus be unselfish through the twosome seeking to fulfil their wish that there is another equal in whom one’s beloved can love and be loved by.

In summary, perfect love, according to Swinburne, would thus be a mutual and unselfish type of love that is ‘a supreme good’ ([Swinburne 1994, p. 191](#)). And by perfect love being a ‘supreme good’, it would present God with a *unique best possible action* that, as a *perfectly good* being, he must perform. In other words, the exemplification of perfect love by the solitary divine person:  $d_1$ , would be an overall best action (or more specifically a unique best possible action) and thus there would an ‘overriding reason’—a reason that supports an action as being sensible, appropriate, reasonable and rational to be performed—for  $d_1$  to inevitably and everlastingly generate another divine person:  $d_2$ —so as to share their love with one another. Furthermore, it would also be an overall best action for  $d_1$  and  $d_2$ , to co-operate with one another to inevitably and everlastingly bring about another divine person:  $d_3$ —so as for them together to share their love with another and provide another person for their beloved to love and be loved by.<sup>2</sup> Thus, given the nature of love that is in play here, if there is one divine person, then, necessarily, there will be two other divine persons—knowledge of which is obtainable *a priori*.<sup>3</sup>

Or, so it seems, as one can raise (what we can call) the *Intuition Objection*, against the *a priori* Love Argument (hereafter, the A Priori Argument) that has been proposed here by Swinburne. That is, according to the Intuition Objection, the A

Priori Argument appears to lack support from any *objective reasons* for its central *a priori* premise: the perfect love (and goodness) of a divine person would necessitate the existence of two other divine persons. Specifically, in the mind of the Intuition Objector, the A Priori Argument seems to be based solely on an *intuitive foundation* concerning the nature of love. Yet, the problem is that intuitions can easily be misguided,<sup>4</sup> and so one can certainly raise questions concerning the reasons *why* the specific aspects of the nature of love in the A Priori Argument—mutuality and unselfishness—should be taken to be ‘great-making’ aspects of love, rather than any other potential aspects of it? Why should mutual and self-less love be a better form of love than self-directed love? As one may argue, along with Harry Frankfurt (2004, pp. 69–100), that it is in fact *self-love* which is the perfect manifestation of love, and thus the mutuality and unselfishness aspects of love are, in fact, not great-making ones. Importantly, however, this is not to say that there are no reasons that can be adduced for one to rationally privilege mutual and unselfish love over that of self-love. Rather, the key point here, according to the Intuition Objection, is that, outside of an intuition, there has been no reason given by Swinburne to accept the specific conception of the nature of love that features in the A Priori Argument (with its Trinitarian implications) over that of any other conception of love (which might lack these implications). Thus, one does not have any good reason to believe that we can, in fact, obtain knowledge concerning the necessity of the Trinity from an *a priori* standpoint. In short, further good (and potentially ‘overriding’) reasons will need to be provided for one to believe that it is, in fact, a necessary truth that there are three divine persons—so, the question now becomes: are there any?

The rest of this article will focus on answering this question and, more importantly, the Intuition Objection, through reformulating the Love Argument in two significant ways: first, by explicating and grounding the argument upon an *a posteriori* philosophical foundation, which will help us to free the argument from its intuition-based foundation. And, second, by expounding a specific form of love—*agapê*, which will serve as the concept of love that supports the case for it being a necessary truth that, if there is one divine person, then there also must exist exactly two other divine persons. More specifically, this article will utilise two philosophical theses to reformulate the Love Argument: first, the influential philosophical notion of the necessary *a posteriori*, introduced by Saul Kripke, and, second, the concept of love: *agapê*, proposed by Alexander Pruss.<sup>5</sup> These two theses, in combination, will provide us with a grounded epistemological framework and some objective reasons for believing in the necessity of the Trinity—ultimately enabling the Love Argument to ward off the Intuition Objection (and two further objections, each of which will be further detailed below). The Love Argument will thus be shown to have some bright prospects for future Trinitarian theorising.

However, before we set off on our reformulation of the Love Argument, it will be helpful to make clear two specific linguistic points that will be expressed throughout: first, the name ‘God’ will be used over that of the generic term ‘solitary divine person’, and this name will be used to designate a single ‘person’: The Father, rather than the Trinity composed of the Father the Son and the Spirit, as it did in the A Priori Argument (and by other Social Trinitarians as well).<sup>6</sup> And thus, within the present account, God is numerically identical to a person, the Father, who is a member of the Trinity. In other words, there are three divine persons within the Trinity: the Father, the Son and the Spirit—each of whom possesses the one divine nature, and thus can equally be called ‘God’, in the *predicative sense*—yet, the one ‘God’, in the *nominal sense* (i.e., as a name), is to be identified as the Father alone.<sup>7</sup> Second, the predicate that expresses the property of *being the person that inevitably causes to exist two other divine persons*, which is ascribed to God within the Love Argument, will now, in its short form, be termed the property of *being the Father*, rather than the property of *being tri-personal*, *being tri-une* or, *being Trinitarian*, as was also the case in the A Priori Argument.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the central focus of the reformulated argument that is to be defended here is that of all individuals being to obtain knowledge concerning the necessity of *God* (i.e., a single divine person) *being the Father* (i.e., the person who inevitably brings about two other divine persons), which will further entail the existence of the Trinity being a necessary truth. The conclusion of the present proposal is, therefore, the same as that of the A Priori Argument; however, the manner and terminology that one is using to reach that conclusion will be different.

Thus, taking all of these things into account, the plan is as follows: in [Section 2](#) (‘Necessary A Posteriori: The Essentialist Route’), I briefly explicate the notion of essentialism and the necessary *a posteriori* introduced by Saul Kripke. Then, in [Section 3](#) (‘Necessary A Posteriori: The Trinitarian Essentialist Route’), I apply these two notions within a Trinitarian context, which will help me to map out an essentialist route to a Trinitarian necessary *a posteriori* and detail the justification and discoveries provided by this route, which all help the Love Argument to ward off the Intuition Objection. In [Section 4](#) (‘Prospects: Further Benefits of the A Posteriori Argument’), I detail the prospects of this argument, which centres on its ability to also ward off two further objections against the A Priori Argument. Finally, in the concluding section (‘Conclusions’), I summarise the above results and conclude the article.

## 2. Prospects: Further Benefits of the A Posteriori Argument

Alongside the ability for the A Posteriori Argument to ward off the Intuition Objection, the argument can also successfully enable one to obtain knowledge concerning the necessary truth of the existence of the Trinity without, however, also succumbing to two further important objections that can be raised against the A Priori Argument: the Dispositional Objection and the Revelation Objection. And so, given this, the prospects for the A Posteriori seem to be bright for future Trinitarian theorising. It will be helpful to now briefly see why these objections provide a good reason for one to favour the A Posterior Argument over that of the A Priori Argument.

**The Dispositional Objection:** is a specific objection against the *concept of love* that is utilised by the A Priori Argument. Specifically, the Dispositional Objection, which has been expressed most recently in the work of Dale Tuggy (2015, 2021), goes as follows: God being a divine person would indeed require him to be a loving person (i.e., possess a specific intrinsic disposition to be loving). However, according to the Dispositional Objector, there is no further requirement for him to be in a loving relationship with two other divine persons, as being perfectly loving (and thus perfectly good) is simply a *dispositional* quality of God that is not required to be exercised (in and through a loving relationship with another). Thus, as Tuggy (2015) notes, there is no specific deficiency in God if he is not in a loving relationship, even if being so is a great good in itself—in the same manner, that there is no deficiency in God if he didn't create anything, despite the great good of doing so. Tuggy (2015, p. 137) expresses this point clearly in writing that:

God would nonetheless, *sans* creation, be perfect. Again, it's a great good to be the source of a gorgeous, amazing cosmos, teeming with life, which one beholds with satisfaction as "very good". But we don't want to say that God would be imperfect if he'd made nothing....were God to have "missed out on something high and wonderful", it doesn't seem to follow that there would be "a deficiency in God". Not all goods, not even all great goods, are such that their absence would render one imperfect. Some goods one doesn't need in order to be perfect.

Therefore, God would still be perfect if he did not utilise his capability to love another divine person prior to creation, in the same way that he would be perfectly good even if he did not utilise his capability to create. Thus, we do not have good reason to believe that God being perfectly loving requires him to inevitably bring about two other divine persons (i.e., be the Father).

This is indeed a successful objection against the A Priori Argument; however, when the Love Argument is reformulated as an A Posteriori Argument, which was done above, this objection does not apply. This is because the objection is assuming that love is to be defined as a disposition that needn't always be exercised (if possible). However, the A Posteriori Argument *fixes* the definition of love as that of *agapê*, which, as noted previously, is *not* a disposition, but one that is constituted by action. Thus, given that the *a posteriori* basis of this argument takes love to have been *revealed* as *agapê*, God *cannot* be perfectly loving if he is not exercising his will in a loving way—if he is not performing the *action* of love. Additionally, as our *a posteriori* basis also takes there to be a duty to show *agapê* to every individual, God *must* be in a loving relationship with two other divine persons in order for him to exemplify (*ek-static*) self-love and for him to consummate the perichoretic relationship that he is in with  $d_2$  by establishing the deepest union possible. Thus, the analogy between God being able to love and being able to create is indeed not a good one, given the *a posteriori* basis of the argument and the empirical discovery which takes love to be an action—*agapê*—and the duty to perform this action presenting God with an overriding action that he *must* perform, given his perfect goodness. Whereas there is no obvious, revealed (or, empirically grounded) reason why one should take there to be a requirement (or, more specifically, an overriding reason) for God to perform the action of creating, even though it is certainly a good thing for God to do so. Therefore, it is clear to see that the Dispositional Objection is not applicable to the A Posteriori Argument. Turning our attention now to the Revelation Objection.

**The Revelation Objection:** is an objection raised against the *philosophical methodology* that is utilised by the A Priori Argument. More precisely, this objection, at a more general level, is found within the work of St. Thomas Aquinas and the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, which we can take to be paradigm examples of the traditional mainstream position. Specifically, the traditional position within Church history has been that the Trinity is not a teaching that is accessible solely on the basis of reason—it is not a teaching that can be known in a way that is divorced from the revelation of God. That is, as Aquinas writes, 'It is impossible to attain to the knowledge of the Trinity by natural reason... Whoever, then, tries to prove the trinity of persons by natural reason, derogates from faith in two ways' (Aquinas 1948, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 32, a.1). Aquinas, as with others, sees that the <sup>[1][2][3][4][5][6][7][8]</sup>Trinity is not a teaching that can purely be reasoned to. And in support of this, the Catechism of the Catholic Church states, 'The Trinity is a mystery of faith in the strict sense, one of the "mysteries that are hidden in God, which can never be known unless they are revealed by God"' (Catholic Church 1997, CCC 237). According to this, the Trinity is thus a 'mystery of faith', which indicates that one

cannot acquire knowledge of the Trinity from a purely *a priori* conceptual analysis of God's nature. Instead, again, one can only obtain knowledge of this teaching by it being revealed by God. So, it is quite clear that Aquinas and the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, which we took to be the paradigm examples of the traditional mainstream position, is in direct contention to the A Priori Argument, which proceeds to establish the necessary truth of the Trinity on the basis of a conceptual analysis of God's nature *alone*. The A Priori Argument thus does not fit with the common and traditional position of the Trinity being a *revealed* doctrine. The Revelation Objector would thus urge one to reject the philosophical methodology that is utilised by this argument and the conclusion that is reached by it.

The Revelation Objection, which is supported by the weight of tradition, thus provides one with a good reason to favour the A Posteriori Argument over that of the A Priori Argument. Specifically, why this is so, is because of the philosophical methodology that is utilised by the A Posteriori Argument being grounded upon empirical, revealed reality. That is, the A Posteriori Argument does not reach the conclusion that the existence of the Trinity is a necessary that is discernible by *reason alone*. Instead, it reaches this conclusion concerning the necessity of the Trinity on the basis of a *dual epistemological path*: an *a priori* analysis and an empirical investigation. More precisely, the statement that 'God is the Father' is knowable on the basis of an *a priori* conceptual analysis of the concept of love: *agapê* (and God's duty fulfilment), *and* an *a posteriori* empirical investigation of the evidence in support of the existence of God and the nature of the duty-imposing, multi-formed *agapê* that he has revealed. The A Posteriori Argument, unlike that of the A Priori Argument, thus allows the Trinity to be grounded upon the foundation of (*a priori*) reason *and* (*a posteriori*) revelation, which is much more in line with that of the traditional position of the doctrine being knowable via God's special acts of revelation (which are in line *with* reason). Therefore, in a similar manner to the Dispositional Objection, it is also clear to see that the Revelation Objection is also not applicable to the A Posteriori Argument.

The A Posteriori Argument thus seems to not be afflicted by some of the more important objections that can be raised against the A Priori Argument (i.e., the Intuition Objection, the Dispositional Objection and the Revelation Objection), and thus the former type of Love Argument should be favoured over that of the latter type in enabling one to obtain knowledge concerning the necessary truth of the doctrine of the Trinity.

### **3. Conclusions**

In conclusion, a new version of the argument from love for the Trinity has been proposed, which utilises the notion of the necessary *a posteriori* and the concept of love as *agapê*. The utilisation of this philosophical notion and concept allowed us to ward off the Intuition Objection (and the Dispositional and Revelation Objections) by re-construing the 'Love Argument' as a kind (or category) of arguments, and then taking the A Posteriori Argument to be a new member of it. This A Posteriori Argument posits that God is necessarily the Father—the divine person who inevitably brings about two other divine persons—if it is true that God exists and love is a duty-imposing *agapê*. However, to discover whether this conditional is, in fact, true, an empirical investigation must be performed. This empirical investigation was (plausibly) taken to be a success, and so our conclusion is that God is indeed the Father—the Trinity is necessary. However, unlike the A Priori Argument, the truth of this matter is not epistemically accessible from a purely *a priori* standpoint. Rather, it is an instance of the *necessary a posteriori*, which does not weaken the Love Argument but, in fact, strengthens it by building it upon an evidentially secure foundation.

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### **References**

1. For Richard St. Victor's argument and overall view on the Trinity, see (Richard of Saint Victor 2012, On The Trinity).
2. This causation must be instantaneous and everlasting as if d1 began to cause d2 to exist at some moment of time in the past, as noted by Swinburne, it 'would be too late: for all eternity before that time he would not have manifested his perfect goodness', (Swinburne 2008, p. 29). Thus, if d1 is to exist, then he must instantaneously and for all time cause and keep in being d2 (and thus experience mutual love with him through sharing all that they have with each other). And together d1 and d2 must instantaneously and for all time cause to exist, and keep in being, d3 (and therefore both experience unselfish love through each divine person having another to love and be loved by).
3. A clear objection that can be raised here is why there must only be three divine persons and not four or more? However, Swinburne (2018) has provided a plausible answer to this question, which will be further detailed below.
4. As Swinburne writes himself that his 'ethical intuitions are inevitably highly fallible' (Swinburne 1994, p. 178).
5. The natural theological argumentation of Swinburne (2004) will also be utilised in achieving this end as well.
6. Along with Swinburne (1994), Social Trinitarians such as William Hasker (2013) and Moreland and Craig (2003) regularly use the name 'God' in reference to the Trinity itself.

7. This specific conception of the Trinity—termed ‘Monarchical Trinitarianism’ in the contemporary analytic theology literature—assumes the veracity of the doctrine of the ‘monarchy of the Father’—the teaching that God is numerically identical to the Father alone—which is in contradistinction from the common position that holds to God being numerically identical to the Trinity. The difference between these positions is more than a linguistic issue as proponents of the monarchy of the Father will take the existence of the Father to be the basis for Christian Theism being monotheistic—as there is ‘one Father’ there is ‘one God’—whereas proponents of the common position would take the existence of the Trinity to be the basis for Christian Theism being monotheistic—the ‘unified collective’ (i.e., the Trinity) is the ‘one God’. For a further philosophical explication of the notion of the monarchy of the Father and its application to the Trinity, see (Sijuwade 2021).
8. One could raise the issue of designating God ‘the Father’ is to already posit the Son (Father of the Son; Son of the Father)—as it is a relational name, which thus requires something to be in relation—however, this is not problematic as the issue under question is whether God is essentially ‘the Father’—as Trinitarians argue that he is—or is contingently ‘the Father’—as (some) non-Trinitarians argue that he is.

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