

# Richard of St. Victor's Argument from Love and Contemporary Analytic Theology of the Trinity

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**Abstract:** In his *De Trinitate* (c.1170) Richard of St Victor gives one of the more intriguing examples of trinitarian philosophical theology. Beginning with our common beliefs about and experiences of love, he argues for the existence of three, and only three, divine persons (call this *The Argument*). This essay explores several points of interaction between The Argument and current discussions in analytic theology of the Trinity. In part one I briefly survey Richard's views on three topics of interest to philosophical trinitarians, namely, the distinction of divine persons, his model of the Trinity, and intra-trinitarian love. In part two I look at some work in these areas by analytic thinkers. My intention here is to apply some elements of The Argument and to show how its appeal may go beyond that of social trinitarians. I propose that Richard's argument cannot receive unqualified adoption by social trinitarians and, alternatively, is more appealing to non-social trinitarians than has thus far been recognized.

**Keywords:** Richard of St. Victor, Trinity, Social Trinitarianism, Non-social Trinitarianism

## Introduction

In his *De Trinitate* (c.1170) Richard of St Victor gives one of the more intriguing examples of trinitarian philosophical theology. Beginning with our common beliefs about and experiences of love, he argues for the existence of three, and only three, divine persons. I will refer to this as *the argument for the Trinity from love*, or simply *The Argument*.

My goal in this essay is to explore several points of interaction between The Argument and current discussions in analytic theology of the Trinity. In part one I briefly survey Richard's views on three topics of interest to philosophical trinitarians, namely, the distinction of divine persons, his model of the Trinity, and

intra-trinitarian love. In part two I look at some work in these areas by analytic thinkers. My intention here is to apply some elements of The Argument and to show how its appeal may go beyond that of social trinitarians. I propose that Richard's argument cannot receive unqualified adoption by social trinitarians and, alternatively, is more appealing to non-social trinitarians than has thus far been recognized.

## 1. Three Themes in Richard of St. Victor

### 1.1. Distinction of Divine Persons

At the heart of Richard's project in *De Trinitate* is his case for precisely three divine persons in the single divine substance. The following summary exemplifies some of The Argument's psychological depth:

Certainly if there were only one person in the divinity, then he would not have someone to whom he could communicate the riches of his magnitude; but, conversely, the abundance of pleasures and sweetness, which could have grown in him on account of the acquisition of an intimate love, would be lacking in eternity...Nothing is found to be more pleasant than the sweetness of love; there is nothing in which the mind is more delighted. (2011, 3.14)<sup>1</sup>

Intimacy, pleasure, unfettered sharing and communication. In this passage, and throughout *De Trinitate*, we do not encounter dusty proofs about the Aristotelian perfect being, but instead something far more evocative. Cousins (1970, 61) places his fingers on pulse of *De Trinitate* when he describes Richard as a "psychologist" who is "sensitive to the nuances of interpersonal relations. With an empiricist's sense of observation and a phenomenologist's ability at painstaking analysis, he explores the dynamisms and depths" of interpersonal love. Social trinitarians in particular have found this line of thought attractive, and in these psychologically rich relations they see support for a robust notion of divine personhood. I will return to this trend later, but for now I want touch on three ways in which Richard views the distinction of the divine persons.

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations are taken from Christopher Evans' English translation. Instead of the page numbers from this translation, I will cite the book and chapter number from *De Trinitate*. This will aid the reader in locating the quoted material in a Latin edition or one of the several English translations available.

## RICHARD OF ST. VICTOR'S ARGUMENT FROM LOVE

Several of The Argument's claims entail distinction between the divine persons, though at times the entailment is implicit and must be teased out. For example, Richard claims that a divine person (hereafter *DP*) desires the good of his beloved, and indeed desires to be united with his beloved in requited love. Further, DP1 knows the delights of his love with DP2, and so DP1 desires for another, DP3, to be loved by DP2 so that DP3's love is not kept hidden. Thus Richard:

In fact in a mutual and very ardent love nothing is rarer and more excellent than your desire for the person, whom you supremely love and who supremely loves you, to love equally another person. And so, the proof of perfected charity is the votive communion of the love that was bestowed to oneself . . . And so, in order for perfection to be completed in the two mutually loved persons . . . it needs . . . a partaker of the love which was shown them. (2011, 3.11)

According to Richard, a divine person (say, DP1) desires for another (DP3) to know what it is like to be loved by DP2. However, DP2 *also* desires that someone else (DP3) know DP1's love. We may graph the possible instances of this type of desire:

	Loves DP <sup>x</sup> . DP <sup>x</sup> is:	Desires for DP <sup>y</sup> to be loved by DP <sup>x</sup> . DP <sup>y</sup> is:
DP1	DP2	DP3
	DP3	DP2
DP2	DP1	DP3
	DP3	DP1
DP3	DP1	DP2
	DP2	DP1

This diagram becomes a bit unwieldy, but does convey the complex desire each divine person has for the others. Each person's desire is distinguished by its subject (i.e. who is doing the willing) and objects (i.e. who are the direct and indirect objects of the willing). Elsewhere Richard explicitly states that there exists numerically one divine will (or love) which is had or shared by each DP (2011, 5.23). Even so, God's single will is expressed in the three persons in the distinct ways just diagrammed.

One area in which Richard explicitly distinguishes the divine persons is by their mode of love (2011, 5.16). To his mind there are three possible ways a divine person may love: by gratuitous love alone; by owed love alone; and by both gratuitous and

owed love.<sup>2</sup> A divine person loves gratuitously when his love for another originates with him, and not in response another's love. Alternatively, a person loves with owed love when he requites the love originally given to him. On this view there is a divine person who loves 'first' or originally by loving from the depth of his being. That is, this person shares all of his being gratuitously with another. This other, second divine person receives his own being from the first as from a source; he then partners with the first in sharing all that he has received with a third. In this way one person only loves gratuitously, a second person loves in response and also gratuitously, and a third only with owed love.<sup>3</sup> In short: three persons distinguished by three modes of love.

The last grounds of personal distinction I will survey is joy.<sup>4</sup> DP1 has a joy which results from DP2's requited love—call this joy<sup>1-2</sup>. DP1's joy is full to overflowing exactly because he can share the fullness of his thoughts, desires, and feelings with another, and have that love perfectly returned. Note that joy<sup>1-2</sup> must be different from DP1's love for DP2, since joy is a *result* of DP1's love, a love by which he shares everything else with DP2. In other words, joy<sup>1-2</sup> comes from DP1's love for DP2, and so cannot be part of that love.<sup>5</sup> Now, since divine persons are neither impotent or greedy, they are able and willing to share all they have. DP1 has a joy which goes beyond his love for DP2, and so DP1 must share his abundant joy with another divine person, viz. DP3. In this case though, joy<sup>1-2</sup> is qualitatively distinct from joy<sup>1-3</sup> and joy<sup>2-3</sup>—namely, it is the joy DP1 has in virtue of his love specifically for DP2.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Given Richard's view of the simplicity of the divine substance, the relations of love just are the relations of origin.

<sup>3</sup> This is also one reason Richard provides against the claim that there can be four or more divine persons. Since no other relations of love exist, any further divine person would have one of the three relations already specified, and therefore would be identical to one of the three divine persons.

<sup>4</sup> The distinction from joy, like that from desire, is implicit to The Argument. Richard recognizes and explicitly details only one type of personal distinction, namely, that from modes of charity. See (Richard of St Victor, 2011, 3.11).

<sup>5</sup> If DP1 shared joy<sup>1-2</sup> with DP2, it would simply fold back into the original act of love. In this case joy<sup>1-2</sup> would be its own cause and effect, which is impossible. Thus joy<sup>1-2</sup> must somehow be distinct from the love between DP1 and DP2.

<sup>6</sup> Richard does not specify that there exists a single divine joy shared by the DPs. He does however make it clear that there is a single intellect, or thought-life (2011, 3.15). The best fit for Richard's project is to view the distinct joys had by each DP as part of the single divine intellect. Even so, a plausible – and not totally unwarranted – argument could be made for reading Richard as allowing for each DP to have a numerically distinct joy. Such a position would be somewhat akin to Gregory of Nazianzus' commitment to God having three wills though there is a single power and goodness. On this point see Langworthy (2019, 19–23).

## 1.2. Two grounds for the unity of the divine persons

So far I have focused on the distinction between divine persons. But taking Richard's wider trinitarian doctrine into view we find a forceful case for the unity of those persons. For instance, Richard devotes the first two books of *De Trinitate* to arguing for the existence of one—and necessarily only one—divine substance. On Richard's account of simplicity, the three persons 'have' and 'share' this single substance. This traditional metaphysic prevents any extreme differentiation between the divine persons, such as the view that the three divine persons are substantially discrete.

The persons are further unified because the divine substance is identical to the divine will, intellect, and power. Since each person has the one substance, they also share the numerically same will and intellect. This commitment of Richard's raises at least two difficulties. The first is a tension internal to Richard's theology. Recall the rich mental, affective, and volitional qualities that divine persons experience on Richard's view. How can a person instantiate these properties, or engage in such acts of love, without having his own numerically separate faculties? That is, how can the distinct elements of intra-trinitarian love cohere conceptually with the doctrine of a single intellect and will? Scholastic thinkers after Richard would devote much thought to these questions, but many today do not take the tension to have been resolved. Second, related to previous point, some find it implausible that a being which does not have its own will is a person in any full sense of the concept.<sup>7</sup> Richard's investment in the classical view of numerically one will resists the social trinitarian intuition that a divine person, like created persons, has its own distinct psychology (will, intellect, etc.). This tension acts as a sort of decision point: to relieve it one may opt for tighter unity and a thinner notion of person, or weaker unity in place of a thicker view of persons.

## 1.3. Intra-Trinitarian Love

The final theme I want to touch on is the nature of charity love. Charity is the crimson thread running throughout Richard's corpus. Here I will direct my attention to four characteristics of charity in *The Argument*. First, charity is the highest type or expression of love.<sup>8</sup> Second, charity is the type of love God has. This should come as no surprise since charity is a great good, and "the fullness of all goodness lies in the

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<sup>7</sup> This type of tension was voiced to me by Professor Swinburne during the reading of this essay at the conference. To his mind, the only suitable adjustment is to posit three numerically distinct wills and intellects – an adjustment he works out in some detail in his own model.

<sup>8</sup> "Indeed, nothing is better than charity, and nothing is more perfect than charity." (2011, 3.2).

supreme and universally perfect good.” (2011, 3.2) Third, charity is multi-termed. That is, by definition charity is a type of love that obtains between two or more persons. (We must see if Richard gives us any good reasons to believe that other-love is better than self-love alone, and we will return to this issue in the final section). Fourth, charity involves some sort of union between lovers (or at least a desire for union), as well as the desire for the beloved’s good. In all four characteristics Richard’s view of love is in line with the general medieval one.

With these notes about love, substance, and persons to hand, we may now turn to some points of intersection between Richard and contemporary analytic theology of the Trinity.

## **2. Analytic Theology and Richard’s Argument**

### **2.1. The Argument and Social Trinitarianism**

Some trinitarians, particularly social trinitarians, find reasoning like that in Richard’s argument attractive. In the psychologically rich relations of love, they not only discover support for three divine persons, but also for something like a modern understanding of those persons as individual, self-conscious centers of intellect and will, which I take to be the core social trinitarian intuition.<sup>9</sup> Above I outlined three areas of The Argument in which divine persons are distinct. Even so, once we take Richard’s model into view, we must rule out any easy movement from The Argument toward decidedly social trinitarianism—at least social trinitarianism that holds to three distinct centers of intellect and will. Given Richard’s model it would be more accurate to speak of a divine person as a ‘hub’ or one who ‘has’ the single divine will.

Perhaps we may map views of personhood on a spectrum. At one end are thin views which leave the notion of person most bare, such as mere personae or hypostases; on this side of the spectrum ‘person’ picks out the minimal answer to the question ‘three divine what?’. The opposite end represents the thickest views, on which ‘person’ picks out a center or subject of conscious experience. On this side of the spectrum the mental attributes are so centered in the subject that personal plurality is unnecessary. On the most extreme end of the spectrum otherness is even impossible—God cannot stand in an I-thou relationship with other persons, whether human, divine, or otherwise.

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<sup>9</sup> This holds true for the three main proponents of philosophical arguments from love, Richard Swinburne (1994), Stephen T. Davis (2016), and William Hasker (2013).

To give a rough survey of where some contemporary thinkers might be plotted on this spectrum, Brian Leftow could be located toward the thin end. For him trinitarian persons have volition, intention, action, and emotion, but are not centers of those faculties; God is properly said to be a 'who', and the three persons are whos in a derivative sense, as "streams" of God's single consciousness (1999, 222). As we move from thin to thick, we find that the divine persons are spoken of less as life-streams in the Leftowvian sense and more often as centers or subjects of intentional volitional action. William Lane Craig (2003, 575–96) and Richard Swinburne (1994) are comfortable with this language. William Hasker includes both elements in his own view, though the latter aspect is decidedly prominent (2013, 193–223). Dale Tuggy (2015, ch. 6) is perhaps *too* comfortable with this idea, since for him a divine person is so individual that it need not exist in relation with other persons. Even more extreme is Keith Ward (2016, 281–296), who does not want to call God a person at all since this terminology pushes our language too far.<sup>10</sup> Tuggy and Ward are located on the extremes of our spectrum of personhood, and I will say more about them later. For now, though, we must ask *Where does Richard fit in here?*

On this spectrum Richard falls somewhere below center, closer to the thin end, near Leftow. While this may strike social trinitarians as *too* thin a view to adequately account for other-love, Richard thinks his persons are full-fledged whos capable of engaging in all the complex love relations included in *The Argument*.<sup>11</sup>

The upshot is that on Richard's model the divine substance is the center of will and intellect, which should alleviate a main worry of non-social trinitarians, namely, their commitment to God's unity. Alternatively, divine persons are self-conscious experiencers, and deeply affective ones at that, which may go some way toward satisfying the intuitions of social trinitarians and appeals to human experiences of love.

## 2.2. The Argument and Non-Social Trinitarianism

Continuing with this last thought, I think that our reflections on *The Argument* reveal that non-social trinitarians need not dismiss Richard's project, at least not because of its view of persons. Richard does not advocate a notion of personhood on which DPs each have a distinct will or intellect. In fact, such a notion may be

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<sup>10</sup> God is personal, though God does not have eternal relations of love since there are not divine persons to have them.

<sup>11</sup> "[A] 'what' rather than a 'who' is indicated by the word "substance," but, conversely, a 'who' rather than a 'what' is designated by the word 'person'." (Richard of St Victor, 2011, 4.7)

incompatible with the strong view of divine unity in Richard's wider trinitarian project.

At least one non-social trinitarian sees potential in arguments from love and has dipped his toes in Richardine waters. The philosopher Alexander Pruss gives a brief defense of Latin trinitarianism grounded in the *generosity* and *unity* of divine love: generosity entails a mutual sharing of the greatest good, viz, the divine being, among at least two divine persons; unity entails the minimal possible distinction among those persons. Since Latin trinitarianism—as Pruss sees it—offers the best option for meeting this second condition, an argument from love “supports Latin trinitarianism very nicely.” (2008)

Now I must point out that non-social trinitarians must be cautious while treading in these waters. When the metaphysical and psychological implications of love are worked out, there will be a strain placed on divine unity, as I highlighted in Richard's case. Even so, Pruss' example reveals that The Argument is a promising source of insight for trinitarians of many stripes.

Many stripes, but not all.

### 2.3. Avoiding Some Extremes

Staying with the theme of love, we also see how The Argument may serve as a corrective to some extremes of philosophical trinitarianism, such as that of Tuggy and Ward.

Tuggy argues that no one has ever given a good reason to believe the following claim,

(L2) Necessarily, if a being is perfect, it enjoys peer love. (2015, 6)

Additionally, Tuggy gives a positive reason for rejecting the premise through the following scenario:

A perfect, divine person exists but doesn't create (or otherwise generate or give existence to) anything else. He's just there, timelessly beholding and loving himself, but not anyone else. He's a perfectly loving being—just as much as he would be were he to whip up some creatures, so as to have an object of love beyond himself. He's all-knowing, and so can perfectly imagine what it's like to love another. But, he doesn't experience any such relationship, as only he exists. This god is perfect, yet perfectly alone. (2015, 10)

A plausible story. And with it Tuggy poses the following question:

What reason have we been given to think the above scenario is impossible? The way one shows a claim to be logically impossible—necessarily false—is by showing how it is *contradictory* to suppose it true. Well then, where is the contradiction? I don't see one. (2015, 10)

He further supports his thought experiment by casting God's perfect goodness in dispositional terms, so that "In principle, it seems that [God] can be perfectly loving without actually loving perfectly, or without actually loving anyone else in any way." God's perfection is maintained so long as He is disposed to love others; there need not actually *be* others for Him to love.

I think there are several ways to respond to Tuggy's attack on L2, but Richard's reply could be as simple as posing a question or two of his own. "Which is the better state of affairs," Richard might ask, "one in which God is disposed to love perfectly but does not (whatever the reason), or one in which God is both disposed and *actually* realizes perfect love?"<sup>12</sup> The second option strikes me as the clear answer, and on Richard's Augustinian method of attributing the highest to God, we have at least one good reason for believing L2.

Further, on Richard's view, charity is not one good among many, but *the* highest good. He does not merely state this value judgement but offers support: "Nothing is sweeter than charity," Richard's tells us, "and nothing is more pleasing." (2011, 3.2) In other words, love is the supreme good because nothing is more pleasing or results in greater joy. Again, he may ask a question, this time a deeply personal one: Which causes more joy, self-love alone, or self-love *and* other-love? If the latter, and this seems hard to deny, then we have another reason to believe L2. A reason, we might add, open to (de)confirmation via common human experience, independent of any faith tradition or purported instance of divine revelation.

Returning to Tuggy's question, we find that Richard gives two reasons for believing L2, i.e. for believing that a perfect God has other-love. The conclusion from both reasons just sketched is that there is no perfection in aloneness. The proposition 'God is alone' entails that 'God is not perfect'. Therefore, the conjunction of propositions 'God is alone' and 'God is perfect' entail a contradiction. Tuggy's thought experiment fails. Richard's argument may also provide some response to Keith Ward's trinitarianism. Ward grants a limited threeness in the immanent

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<sup>12</sup> This is not a question Richard actually asks, but it does fit the line of thought he develops in *De Trinitate*.

Trinity, but these are not conscious, and certainly not persons. He rejects trinitarian arguments largely because of their malformed view of love. Ward asks,

Would these divine persons really be loving, in any intelligible sense? It is notoriously difficult to define love, but it seems to imply admiration and respect, even devotion and desire. It implies willingness to put oneself to some trouble to help others. It implies a willingness to cooperate with other in realizing their purposes. And it implies being interested in the experiences of others, and sharing new experiences with them. (2016, 285)

In short, real love between persons—whether human or divine—must involve learning, sacrifice, forbearance (“to put up with another’s foibles”), the potential for hurt and forgiveness (2015, 179). On Ward’s account love is always risky, and this implies that lovers—even divine ones—are not omnipotent, omniscient beings. Thus, Ward flatly rejects argumentation from love: “To speak of love between divine persons is virtually vacuous. The reason is simple: each being perfect, they need no others.” (2015, 179)

Now, Ward’s desire to keep our reasoning about love grounded in common experience is laudable, and Richard works hard to do the same. I think Richard would welcome Ward’s claim that love implies admiration, respect, devotion, and especially desire. Additionally, we may grant Ward’s intuitions and conclusions about love in the human sphere. But we are doing *perfect* being theology, and by definition a perfect, complete being has no needs or deficiencies. *Mutatis mutandis*, perfect love is not risky, it does not entail the need for loss or hurt. At its fundamental metaphysical level God’s love entails desire, but not need.

Admittedly, Ward wants to move away from an overly Hellenized view of God and God’s perfection. Fair enough. We need not hold to a 12<sup>th</sup> century Platonism to feel the force of Richardine replies. Instead, we may proceed via a direct appeal to intuition: by which type of person would *you* rather be loved: one who has much to learn about you, who may even reject you? Or one who knows you fully, who would not ever, indeed could never, reject you as his beloved? If the perfect lover is the better one, then once again we are right in attributing this to God.

But Ward also wants to avoid perfect being theology. This too we may grant. We need only do a little perfect *love* speculation<sup>13</sup>. In this case we may ask with which love would you prefer to be loved: one that must grow to fit you, that is risky for both you and your lover; or one in which you are guaranteed to be known, accepted,

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<sup>13</sup> Ward permits the possibility since, “It is, after all, perfect and limitless love of which we are trying to speak” when we talk about God’s love (2015, 291).

and which promises exceptional joy? I find it difficult to credit that anyone could ever choose the former in lieu of the latter. Such a love is certainly plausible. (Isn't it what we expect from our lovers, and secretly hope for in ourselves?). Ward has a difficult time imagining that such a relation can be rightly called love. Whatever we call it, human experience testifies to its power. And only a complete, wholly perfect person can love in such a way, in which case there *are* perfect divine lovers—and The Argument is off and running once again.

## Conclusion

In the first part of this essay, I surveyed three areas of Richard's argument, and in the second part I argued that they provide some straightforward and powerful responses to critique of traditional trinitarianism. For at least these reasons *The Argument* warrants a closer reading by philosophical social trinitarians and holds some valuable insights hitherto unmined. Further, I have sought to show that arguments from love ought not be dismissed by non-social trinitarians. Indeed, some forms of trinitarian arguments—such as that of Richard of St. Victor—are quite amenable to some of their main sensibilities.

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