Introduction & Overview

One mark of the growing field of analytic theology is its interest in specifically Christian, or so called *Ramified Natural Theology*. Thinkers such as Richard Swinburne, Tom Morris, Stephen Davis, William Lane Craig, and very recently Bill Hasker all incorporate trinitarian speculation into their philosophical theology. These thinkers draw from our rich tradition, but a soft spot with the trend is the lack of serious interaction with the historical source material.

Contemporary projects will only be strengthened by historically sensitive attention to some of the best trinitarian thinkers in our tradition. Here I have in mind the likes of Gregory Nazianzen, Richard of St. Victor, and of course St. Bonaventure. These theologians each articulate positions more extensive and often more subtle than anything on offer today. This study aims to be a first step toward making St. Bonaventure’s work more accessible, specifically his argument in the *Sentence Commentary*. His argument there has four steps,

Step 1 – identify key suppositions about the divine nature.
Step 2 – argue for multiple divine persons.
Step 3 – argue for at least three divine persons.
Step 4 – argue against the possibility of an infinite number of divine persons.
Step 5 – argue for only three divine persons.

This short paper is primarily a summary overview of Bonaventure’s trinitarian argument grounded in the notion of beatitude.¹ Focus is on steps 2, 3, and 5, where the notion is most discussed; I mention 1 in passing and skip 4 altogether since beatitude is not employed in these steps.

Steps 1 & 2 – multiple divine persons

Step 1 concerns the nature of the divine substance and is the metaphysical foundation for all further trinitarian reasoning. Just before turning to trinitarian questions, Bonaventure considers ‘Whether there is only one God?’ (*I Sent.* d.2, q.1). There he makes the threefold supposition that God is: (i) simple, (ii) the one whom nothing greater can be thought, and (iii) is *sumnum*. (Hereafter I translate *sumnum* as ‘supreme’ and ‘highest’ interchangeably.)

With these suppositions about the divine substance in place, Bonaventure gives four discrete sets of arguments for the claim that in God there is a plurality of person. The first of these is grounded in the notion of supreme beatitude and states,

> wherever there is a most high beatitude, there is a most high goodness, a most high charity, and a most high jocundity. But if there is a most high goodness, since it belongs to goodness to communicate itself

¹ This paper is a condensed version of a longer work, *Bonaventure’s I Sentence Argument for the Trinity from Beatitude*, out for review.
in a most high manner, and this is most greatly in producing from itself an equal and in giving its own ‘being’ [esse]; ergo etc. If a most high charity, since charity is not a private love, but (a love) for another: therefore it requires a plurality. Likewise, if a most high jocundity, since “there is no jocund possession of any good without company”, therefore, for the most high jocundity there is required society and, thus, plurality. (I Sent. d.2, q.2, fund.1)

The argument from beatitude is composed of three sub-arguments: one from supreme goodness, charity, and jocundity. Adding the assumptions about the single divine substance, we may outline the argument this way,

The argument for plurality of divine persons from beatitude
1. God is supremely simple, the highest that can be thought, and supreme.  
2. In God there is most high beatitude.  
3. Necessary for most high beatitude are: (i) supreme goodness; (ii) supreme charity; (iii) supreme jocundity.  
4. Any of (i), (ii), and (iii) are sufficient for a plurality of divine persons.  
5. Therefore, in God there is a plurality of divine persons.

Let us begin our analysis of the argument by looking at Bonaventure’s notion of beatitude.

Beatitude and premise 2

We may approach the notion of God’s beatitude in Bonaventure’s work from several viewpoints. First is the formal-objective distinction. Formally, beatitude is a perfection or fullness of the soul, a completion of all of one’s potencies. Objectively, beatitude is the restoring principle – the object which effects formal perfection in the subject. For God, the form and object of beatitude coincide: God is perfection and so is the object of perfection.

Second, we may consider beatitude under the concept of causation. As ‘supreme’, God is maximally powerful, both creating and effecting the grace necessary for a created being to achieve the form of beatitude (efficient cause). As supremely simple, God is goodness itself, and thus is the beatitudinal form – the form of perfection in which a subject participates (exemplar cause). As sumnum bonum, God is the ultimate, perfecting end of all created beings (final cause).

Third, beatitude encompasses all powers and potencies of the subject. For God this includes intellect, will, and affect. Intellectively, God fully beholds, or sees the divine goodness by knowing himself. Along with full knowledge, God completely wills or loves the divine goodness. God’s desires for himself are completely fulfilled, resulting in a fulfillment of the affect, both a fullness of joy as well as a rest in the satisfaction of all desires.

Summarized briefly we can say that beatitude is the state in which a subject is unified with (or possesses, or beholds) the supreme good. Supreme beatitude, then, is supreme unification with (or possession, or beholding of) the supreme good. With this overview, we are in a position to see how Bonaventure moves from premise 1 to premise 2. In 1 he identifies three aspects of the divine nature which are collectively necessary and sufficient for 2. For the sake of time, let us isolate the notion of God’s supremacy, which yields the following,

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2 This way of thinking about beatitude and the next are drawn from the unpublished thesis of Father Nathaniel Macheske O.F.M., *The Essence of Beatitude According to St. Bonaventure* (Burlington, Wisconsin; St. Francis College, 1943), chp.2.
The argument for supreme beatitude from supremacy

6. God is supreme (or *summum*, ‘most high’).
7. If God is supreme, then God is supremely perfect.
8. To be perfect is to have beatitude.
9. To be supremely perfect is to have supreme beatitude.
10. Therefore, God has supreme beatitude.

God is supremely, or maximally, good, and so has every highest perfection to the greatest possible degree. Since he possesses supreme goodness, he possesses supreme beatitude. Notice that the move from 1 to 2 is one of metaphysical necessity. Since God is supreme, he necessarily has supreme beatitude.

Premise 3: supreme beatitude includes supreme goodness, charity, and jocundity.

Moving on to premise 3, let us first address the nature of goodness, charity, and jocundity before examining their arguments.

First is goodness. Of course this is a wide notion in Bonaventure’s work, and in Scholastic thought generally. For the present discussion it will be most helpful to think of God’s goodness through Bonaventure’s notion of *Deum Esses* – or as J. Isaac Goff translates it, ‘pure being’. To have or be pure being is to be fully in act. This means that *Deum Esse* is necessary (it cannot not exist), and – more pertinent to the argument from goodness – it has every highest perfection and has them maximally.

Next, charity is, roughly, the mutual love between two or more persons. It is the highest of all affectations because it is the “root”, or grounds, of all other affective states such as joy and hope. Finally, charity is considered the highest expression of love, in part, because it is the most delightful type of love.

Finally, jocundity is the delight and overflowing happiness that occurs when enjoying a good thing with another person.

Though brief, our summary of the nature of these three qualities begins to reveal why they are coextensive with beatitude: goodness, charity, and jocundity accompany beatitude because they *compose* beatitude – at least in part. As we saw, beatitude is a complex state that can be considered from several perspectives. Considered objectively, it is the perfect object (i.e. goodness) to which the subject moves (via love), and in which she finds joy (jocundity). Considered causally, beatitude is the state of joy which results when a subject moves through the will toward her final end. Whichever way we approach the concept, will, goodness, and joy are present as constitutive elements of beatitude. In this way we see the force of necessity in which these qualities are present, namely, logical necessity: beatitude just *is* the will’s knowledge of and joyous rest in the good.

Thus supreme beatitude is the supreme love for the supreme good, having or being unified to that good, and the resulting experience of supreme joy.

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Bonaventure’s Trinitarian Argument from Beatitude

**Premise 4: supreme goodness, charity, and jocundity are each sufficient for a plurality of divine persons**

Next Bonaventure lays out three arguments for the presence of multiple divine persons in the divine substance – one each from supreme goodness, charity, and jocundity. Let us take each in turn.

**Goodness.** Bonaventure reasons from goodness this way,

But if there is a most high goodness, since it belongs to goodness to communicate itself in a most high manner, and this is most greatly in producing from itself an equal and in giving its own ‘being’ [esse]:

*ergo etc.* *(I Sent. d.2, q.2, fund.1)*

The operative principle here is the well-recognized and much-studied one, ‘goodness is self-diffusive’. Often called the *Dionysian Principle* – though it traces back through Alexander of Hales and ultimately Plato – the idea here is that every good thing, and therefore every actually existing thing, diffuses or otherwise causes being. Philosophically, the principle appeals to common experience, and Plotinus articulates some of the most powerful arguments in its favour, such as the following,

And all beings, while they abide, give off from their own being, around themselves on the outside, from the power present in them, a necessary dependent existence, which is an image, as it were, of the archetypes from which it emerged. Fire gives off heat from itself, and snow does not only keep cold within itself. Fragrant things especially, bear witness to this; for as long as they exist, something around them proceeds from them, and what is nearby enjoys their existence. And all things, once they are perfect, generate; but what is eternally perfect eternally generates and generates what is eternal.⁴

In this passage Plotinus not only confirms the self-diffusion of the good in our common, publicly accessible experience, he makes the further inference that the principle must therefore hold for divine beings.

Having discussed some of the nature of goodness and its tendency to self-diffuse, we can now outline and analyse the Argument from Goodness:

*The argument for plurality of divine persons from goodness*

12. Supreme goodness is supremely self-diffusive.
13. Supreme self-diffusion includes (i) producing an equal and (ii) giving one’s own being.
14. God is supreme goodness.
15. Therefore, God produces an equal and gives his own being to another.
16. God’s being is personal – God is at least one person.
17. Therefore, in there is a plurality of divine persons.

There are a few points we must consider about this argument. First, Bonaventure assumes that God is personal; in some sense God is or includes a ‘who’. *Supreme* self-diffusion means giving all of one’s-self that one possibly can give; since God is a who, then he gives enough to produce another who. Related to this, the second point is that the argument does not entail the existence of multiple divine substances. Though I can only state this and not go into detail, this route was closed off in distinction 2 question 1, where Bonaventure argues for the impossibility of multiple divine substances. Thus any ‘whos’ or persons produced must share or have the divine substance, and in this way are each equal to one another.

Bonaventure next argues from supreme charity,

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If a most high charity, since charity is not a private love, but (a love) for another: therefore it requires a plurality. \( (I\text{ Sent. d.2, q.2, fund.1}) \)

Sticking close to Bonaventure’s language, we may outline the argument this way,

\textit{The argument for plurality from charity}

18. Charity is not private love, but is love for another.
19. Supreme charity is supreme love for another.
20. Therefore, in God there is a plurality of persons.

Premise 19 may be easily misconstrued as claiming that charity is exclusive to self-love. There was a bit of debate on the issue in medieval theology. Here Bonaventure should be read as committed only to the claim that charity is not mere self-love but, as discussed above, is a species of love which is essentially mutual.

Within the argument from plurality are a few tacit premises which we may draw out,

\textit{The argument for plurality of divine persons from charity}

21. God has supreme charity.
22. Charity is love between multiple persons.
23. Therefore, God has supreme love for another person.
24. Supreme love can only obtain between divine persons.
25. Therefore, there is a plurality of divine persons.

Perhaps the most pressing question about this argument is in response to premise 24, \textit{Why can't God love a created being supremely?} Richard of St. Victor addresses the question head-on, arguing that a created being is not worthy of supreme love. If God loved a finite being infinitely, then God’s love would be disordered. But God’s love cannot be disordered, and so for a divine person to love supremely he must love another divine person.

Bonaventure is certainly familiar with Richard’s response, but does not employ it. In fact, Bonaventure does not explicate any answers to our hypothetical question. I think this is because Bonaventure takes it as obvious that supreme mutual love is incompatible with divine-human love. To see why, recall that love is the ‘root’, or ground, of all other affectations – an act of love is an act of sharing all of one’s thoughts and emotions. Even if a created person could somehow receive all of God’s love (which looks impossible), she could never fully requite that love in kind or degree. Thus divine-creature love can never be maximally complete, can never be supreme.\(^5\)

\textit{Jocundity}. Next is the argument from jocundity,

Likewise, if a most high jocundity, since “there is no jocund possession of any good without company”, therefore, for the most high jocundity there is required society and, thus, plurality.

Outlined:

26. Jocundity is a joy shared with another.
27. Supreme jocundity is supreme joy shared with another.
28. Therefore, in God there is a plurality of persons.

As with the argument from charity, we may usefully expand upon Bonaventure’s concise statement,

\(^5\) Cf. \textit{Itinerarium chp.6.2.}
The argument for plurality of divine persons from jocundity

29. God has supreme jocundity.
30. Therefore, God supremely shares joy with another person.
31. Supreme joy can only obtain among divine persons.
32. Therefore, there is a plurality of divine persons.

As with the previous arguments for plurality, Bonaventure’s reasons for believing God has jocundity is grounded in experience, and he refers to philosophical tradition to develop the point. In this case he employs a moral principle from one of Seneca’s

(Senecan Principle) There is no jocund possession of any good without company.

As a general description, joy results in a subject when she possesses — say, by discursive knowledge or sensory experience — some good object. The core idea in the Senecan Principle is that when two or more subjects enjoy some good together, the resulting joy is (i) greater than that which is possible when had alone, (ii) a qualitatively distinct type of joy, or both i and ii. Bonaventure’s use of the Senecan Principle should not be seen as an appeal to authority. Like the Dionysian Principle and the supremacy of love, the Senecan Principle itself is verifiable — or falsifiable — via common human experience.

At first blush this principle seems dubious as a universal maxim since there appear to be many goods which are less enjoyable in company; in fact, some goods, such as a relaxing game of solitaire, are only possible to experience alone. Fortunately, Bonaventure does not rely on the universal application of the principle. Upon closer inspection we see his claim is only that supreme delight occurs in the company of others. In other words, a divine person’s enjoyment of his perfect goodness is increased when shared with another. Like we saw with charity, the claim is not that God must actualize or have all possible forms of joy, only that he must have the very greatest. Perfect charity and perfect jocundity are the greatest experiences of love and joy, and Bonaventure claims only that God must have these. Since supreme charity and jocundity necessitate multiple supreme — or divine — persons, God has multiple divine persons.

Minimum of three divine persons

Two show why God has at least three divine persons, Bonaventure argues from beatitude, which is simply a terse summary of Richard of St. Victor’s argument in which he reasons that supreme love cannot not stay contained between two lovers, but necessarily turns out to a third. Summarized,

Richard’s argument for three divine persons from love
33. Supreme charity lacks no excellent characteristic.
34. The desire that someone else be loved as you are is an excellent characteristic.
35. Therefore, supreme charity entails that each divine person desires for someone else to be loved as he is.
36. Divine persons would be able to fulfill their desire for someone else to be loved as they are.
37. Therefore, two divine persons would love a third divine person with charity-love.

Premise 33 conveys the idea that supreme charity is totally complete, has every quality proper to charity, and has them to the fullest possible degree. Premise 34 does most of the heavy lifting and can be stated positively and
negatively. Positively, giving and receiving perfect love results in a tremendous joy. With this joy comes the desire that someone else know what it’s like to be loved by the beloved – the desire that another to partake in those special experiences that come with loving the beloved. For example, if you were loved by a perfect lover then you would want someone else to know the delight that your lover brings. Stated negatively, you don’t want your beloved to be a secret; you don’t want them and their love to go unknown. What to say about this argument?

Initially, premise 34 looks problematic. The worry is that in many relationships we absolutely don’t desire that some outside party experience our beloved as we do. An obvious example is romantic love, in which lovers typically desire that their partner be romantic only with them. However, this sort of scenario misses the point of 34. Richard is not proposing that lovers desire for their beloved to give identical love to another. In fact, such a proposal would be ridiculous. For instance, a father does not desire that his child love the mother precisely as he (the father) is loved. In other words, Dad wants Son to love Mom as Mom, not as Dad. Similarly for divine persons (DP). DP1 shares supreme charity with D2. If 34 is true, then DP1 desires that there be a DP3 who knows the delights of DP2’s love. However, DP1’s desire is that DP3 is loved in the way appropriate to DP3 – DP3 must be loved qua DP3. Stated generally, the idea is that a divine persons experiences supreme joy in loving another divine person – his desire is for that joy to push the bounds of just the two lovers and overflow to another.

No more than four divine persons

To complete his trinitarian speculation Bonaventure must show why it is impossible that four or more divine persons exist. He addresses the question Whether there are only three divine persons? employing the notions of beatitude, perfection, simplicity, and primacy. Continuing with our focus on the first notion, we will look at his two arguments from beatitude. He advances the first in the arguments for the opposite,

From the first supposition [viz., beatitude] it is thus shown: if there is a most high beatitude there: therefore, a most high concord; therefore, there is a most high sharing-of-one-origin and supreme charity. But if there were more than three, there would not be a most high sharing-of-one-origin there; if less, there would not be a most high charity there: therefore, there are only three. (I Sent., d. 2, q. 4, resp. )

This argument builds upon previously established conclusions regarding charity and advances those conclusions. Outlined,

The argument for exactly three divine persons from beatitude
38. If there is supreme beatitude, then there is supreme concord.
39. If there is supreme concord, then there is a supreme sharing of one origin and supreme charity.
40. If there were more than three divine persons, there would not be a supreme sharing of one origin.
41. If there were fewer than three divine persons, there would not be supreme charity.
42. Therefore, there are exactly three divine persons.

Bonaventure has already argued for the necessity of at least two divine persons. Premise 38 assumes the plurality previously argued, and also assumes the previously established presence of supreme beatitude. Having beatitude, divine persons must be supremely harmonious or sharing (concordia). Premise 39 specifies two necessary elements of supreme concord. First, divine persons must be in concord regarding their origin (germanitas). This means that
each divine person shares all that he can. Second, the divine persons are maximally united and completely at rest
with one another, they share supreme love.

Bonaventure gives a sub-argument for premises 40 and 41. We may outline the argument for 40 this way,

The argument against a fourth divine person from concordance
43. A fourth divine person, DP4, proceeds from: (i) DP1, (ii) DP1 and DP2 (iii) DP1, DP2, and DP3.
44. If i or ii, then he does not equally convene with DP3.
45. If iii, then DP2 and DP3 convene with one another more than with DP1 and DP4.
46. If DP2 convenes more with DP3 than with DP1 and DP4, then there is not a perfect nexus.

Key for this argument is the notion of concordance (concordia) and convenience (convenio). Both express the idea
of unity between parties which involves sharing, unity in purpose, and a resulting peace and harmony. From
beatitude we know that there are multiple divine persons, but we also know that they each enjoy completion and
joy. Premises 39 through 46 all trade on the idea that supreme beatitude is not enjoyed by the divine persons in
isolation; instead, their supreme happiness necessarily includes their mutual, ongoing relationality. Thus all of
the action takes place in 44 and 45.

Premise 44 argues that perfect concord is missing if a fourth divine person shares no origin with one of the
preceding three. Bonaventure earlier described what it means to share origin, “the Father gives the whole, of
what he can, to the Son” by “producing” the Son, which is a “giving [dare].” To supremely convene, each divine
person must give everything which is in his power to give. Per premise 44, one divine person withholds from
(the hypothetical) DP4.

Premise 45 begins with the idea that DP4 proceeds from all three others. In this case, DP2 and DP3 share more
with each other than with the others. This is so because DP2 and DP3 each proceed from another (DP2 proceeds
from DP1; DP3 proceeds from DP1 and/or DP2), and each produce another. The force of this argument is
grounded on the fact that there are only three modes of existing given the relations of emanation: un-produced
and producing, produced and producing; only producing. I think we may schematize the thought this way,

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What 45 argues, and the diagram seeks to show, is that DP2 and DP3 both share two features (being produced
and producing), while DP1 and DP4 each share only one feature (producing and produced, respectively).
Compare with three persons,

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6 I Sent., d. 2, q. 4, fund. 1.
Three divine persons are each characterized by one of the modes of emanation, and no two persons share more in common with one another than with a third. This is the perfect 'nexus' Bonaventure mentions in 46.

Bonaventure also gives a sub-argument for premise 40,

Likewise, if there were less than three, there would not be a perfect charity there, because a perfect love both is liberal and is common: because it is liberal, for that reason it tends unto the other; because it is common, for that reason it wants one to be loved by the other and that one love the other as itself and by itself: therefore, there is a dilection and a condilection there; but this cannot be among less than three. (I Sent., d. 2, q. 4, ad. 4.)

We have already discussed this line of reasoning, so I will move to the second argument against four or more persons.

The argument from fecundity

Bonaventure argues from fecundity this way,

Likewise, the reason for the necessity, why there cannot be more, is…the principal fecundity, which does not permit a person to produce by any genus of emanation, except according to the reckoning of understanding it be prior to it. Whence the first Person, because He is innascible and inspirable, generates and spirates; the second, because (He is) inspirable, but generated, does not generate, but does spirate; but the third Person, because He is spirated and proceeds from one generating, neither generates nor spirates. And for this reason it is impossible, that there be more than three. (I Sent., d. 2, q. 4, resp.)

This argument builds on many of the concepts already introduced. Outlined,

The argument from fecundity against the possibility of four or more divine persons

47. Divine persons are distinguished by their mode of emanation.

48. There are only three modes of emanation.

49. Therefore, it is impossible for four or more divine persons to exist.

The idea in premise 47 is that, given God’s simplicity, divine persons each fully, and therefore equally, have the divine nature. If there were no difference between the persons whatsoever, then they would be identical, and God would not really be tri-personal. Bonaventure places the distinction between the mode of origination, so that the fecund Father is distinguished by being un-emanated (i.e., innascible and inspirable), the Son by being generated, and the Spirit by being spirated. Per 48 there are no other logically possible modes of emanation premise. Thus, the existence of four or more persons is impossible.

The argument from charity

Last, Bonaventure advances a fittingness argument from charity,

From the sufficiency of the combinations, because since “there is love among all the Persons”, as Richard of St. Victor says, and there is not but a threefold love, namely “gratuitous and due and a mingling from both”, there are only three Persons: One, who only gives, in whom is gratuitous love: the Other, who only accepts, in whom is due love; and a Middle, who gives and accepts, in whom is a love mingled from both. (I Sent., d. 2, q. 4, resp.)
Bonaventure’s Trinitarian Argument from Beatitude

Outlined,

The argument from charity against the possibility of four or more divine persons
50. Each divine person loves in a different mode.
51. There are only three modes of loving.
52. Therefore, it is impossible for four or more divine persons to exist.

Drawing from Richard, Bonaventure avers that there are only three ways to love: (i) gratuitous (amor gratuitus), (ii) owed (amor debitus), and (iii) both gratuitous and owed. Bonaventure draws from Richard to make an argument from congruence (a ratio congruitatis) “from the sufficiency of the combinations”:

Likewise, they can be combined in another manner according to the reason of origin, and the sufficiency of this manner of combination consists in three things. For it happens that one understands a person who is the beginning of a person and is not begun, and again a person, who is begun and not a beginning of a person, and in a third manner a person, who is begun and a beginning. But the fourth manner, because it is neither a beginning nor begun, is entirely impossible and non intelligible. (I Sent., d. 2, q. 4, resp.)

In his argument, Richard applies divine simplicity to the notion of mutual love to make the point that the personal modes of loving are in fact the modes of procession. Bonaventure captures that logic here and resulting argument’s structure is parallel to the argument from concordance,

53. Divine persons are only distinguished by their mode loving.
54. There are only three modes of loving.
55. Therefore, it is impossible for four or more divine persons to exist.

This argument makes it clear that Bonaventure is fully aware of the proof’s necessary conclusion.

Conclusion

Bonaventure’s trinitarian argument from beatitude is, as we have seen, comprehensive, complex, and quite subtle. It is representational of his three other sets of arguments (from perfection, simplicity, and primacy) which I have not discussed. The upshot of all this for modern thinkers is that our trinitarian predecessors have left us a rich pool of thought. Contemporary trinitarian speculation – indeed, trinitarian theology generally – is well served to give Bonaventure and other great trinitarians more careful thought.

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7 Richard of St. Victor, De Trinitate, bk. 5.16.