God from God: The Essential Dependence Model of Eternal Generation

According to the doctrine of eternal generation, the Father eternally begets the Son. Or, more plainly, the eternal Son depends on the Father for his existence, yet the Son is neither created nor made. The doctrine, enshrined in the Creed of Nicaea (325 C.E.), has been affirmed by Christians for nearly 1700 years and defended by theological heavyweights such as Athanasius, Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, and Barth. Recently, however, the doctrine has been attacked from an unlikely corner of Christendom, by otherwise orthodox evangelical Protestants. Eternal generation, its detractors contend, is both philosophically and theologically suspect. My aim in this paper is to defend the doctrine of eternal generation by proposing a possible model that avoids standard philosophical and theological objections. Eternal generation, I argue, can be understood as a form of essential dependence. To say that the Son is begotten of the Father is just to say that the Son essentially depends on the Father. The essence of the Son involves the Father, but not vice versa. I begin by presenting the doctrine of eternal generation and by rehearsing standard philosophical and theological objections to the doctrine. I then develop my essential dependence model of eternal generation and demonstrate how it avoids the standard objections.¹

¹ A comment on my method and a disclaimer. As an exercise in Christian philosophical theology, my approach will be generally philosophical, but I will also take it for granted that the witness of Scripture, comprised of the Old and New Testaments, carries evidential weight. Indeed, I will cite portions of Scripture in support of my essential dependence model of eternal generation. I will not argue for the evidential value of Scripture here, however; it is simply assumed. Furthermore, note well that my essential dependence model of eternal generation is just that: a possible model—not a mandate. It is one possible—and, I contend, plausible model that aims to show the doctrine of eternal generation’s philosophical coherence. In a much longer version of this paper, I consider competing models and objections to my essential dependence model.
1 The Doctrine

The doctrine of eternal generation is part of the classical Christian doctrine of the Trinity. On the classical Christian doctrine of the Trinity, the one God eternally exists as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God is one *ousia* (substance or essence) in three *hypostases* (persons). The Athanasian Creed puts it this way: “So the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God; and yet they are not three Gods, but one God.” Most of the ink spilt on the doctrine of the Trinity by contemporary analytic philosophers has focused on how the one God is Triune, what has been dubbed the “threeness-oneness problem” or the “logical problem” of the Trinity. Most of the ink spilt on the doctrine of the Trinity by contemporary analytic philosophers has focused on how the one God is Triune, what has been dubbed the “threeness-oneness problem” or the “logical problem” of the Trinity. Difficulties surrounding the doctrine of eternal generation are largely independent from the threeness-oneness problem, and so I will bracket the problem for present purposes.

A central component of the classical Christian doctrine of the Trinity is the *divine processions* or the *eternal relations of origin* in God. The Persons are related to one another by eternal relations of origin: the Son is eternally begotten of the Father, and the Spirit eternally proceeds from the Father (and the Son or through the Son). As this parenthetical remark suggests, controversy arises over the Son’s involvement in the eternal procession of the Spirit. Whether the Spirit eternally proceeds from the Father alone (single procession), from the Father and the Son (double procession), or from the Father through the Son is a vexed matter, dividing the Eastern and Western Church. This controversy, the “*filioque*”

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2 For instance, contributors to the volume by McCall and Rae (2009) overwhelmingly focus on the threeness-oneness problem of the Trinity. Readers interested in this problem should head there for a wealth of solutions. By comparison, discussions of the doctrine of eternal generation by contemporary philosophers are scarce. The only contemporary analytic philosopher, to the best of my knowledge, to defend the doctrine at length is William Hasker. Not even Hasker, however, proposes a possible model of eternal generation. See his (2012: ch. 26).
controversy,” while intimately related to the one concerning eternal generation, falls outside our present focus.³

According to the doctrine of eternal generation, the Father eternally begets the Son. The ancient Church, responding to Arians wishing to deny the equality of the Father and the Son, placed two critical constraints on the relation of eternal begettin. First, the relation between the Father and the Son is not one of creation. The Father does not create the Son. The relation between the Father and the Son must be importantly different from the relation between the Father and creation. The Son is “begotten, not made.” Second, the Son’s begetting is neither contingent nor against the Father’s will. The Father eternally begets the Son “of necessity.” Just as the Son cannot exist without the Father, the Father cannot exist without the Son; they are mutually inseparable. Necessarily, the Father exists if and only if the Son exists. The eternal begetting of the Son is not against the Father’s will in the sense that the Father is not under some external compulsion. He willingly affirms the begetting of the Son. Operating within these two constraints, we can formulate a minimal statement of the doctrine of eternal generation as follows:

\[ \text{Eternal Generation:} \]
\[ \text{Necessarily, the Son depends on the Father for his existence, yet the Son exists eternally.} \]

Whatever it means for the Father to eternally beget the Son, it means at least this.⁴ The Son depends on the Father for his existence or, equivalently, the Son exists in virtue of the Father.

³ My essential dependence model of eternal generation naturally extends to the eternal procession of the Holy Spirit and is compatible with any position on the filioque controversy. Unfortunately, space constrains prevent me from elaborating on this virtue of the model, along with several other virtues.
⁴ More stringent formulations of the doctrine add that the Father “communicates” the divine essence (\textit{ousia}) to the Son, which is meant to preclude the Father from “deifying” the Son, so to
When human parents beget a son, the son (causally) depends on his parents for his existence; similarly, when the Father begets the Son, the Son in some way depends on the Father for his existence. Moreover, the Son exists *eternally*. There was never a time at which he was not, and there never will be. At minimum, then, eternal generation requires eternal existential dependence.

2 Objections

Detractors of eternal generation level three main objections against the doctrine. According to these detractors, the doctrine of eternal generation has no biblical warrant, is unintelligible, and entails subordinationism. The first of these objections, the *no biblical warrant objection*, is the most commonly voiced. The doctrine of eternal generation allegedly finds no support in Scripture. Bruce Ware (2005), for instance, when addressing the divine processions, writes, “The conception of both the ‘eternal begetting of the Son’ and ‘eternal procession of the Spirit’ seem to me highly speculative and not grounded in biblical teaching.”\(^5\) To undermine ostensible biblical support for the doctrine, detractors typically argue that the verses in question either refer to the incarnation or rely on a mistranslation of the Greek term *monogenēs*, which ought to be translated as ‘only’ or ‘unique’ rather than ‘only begotten’. While important, the no biblical warrant objection is more exegetical in nature (as opposed to the philosophical or theological nature of the other two objections) and has been

adequately addressed by others. Consequently, I leave the no biblical warrant objection to the exegetes.

The second main objection is that eternal generation is unintelligible. Those who wield the *unintelligibility objection* claim that the doctrine is meaningless or philosophically incoherent. Millard Erickson (2009) speaks for many:

> Philosophically, [eternal generation] has been deemed by many to draw a distinction that does not make sense: to insist on some sort of eternal derivation of being from the Father, or the Father being eternally the source of the subsistence of the other two persons, yet in such a way that they are not at all created by him.\(^7\)

Eternal generation is philosophically incoherent, at worst, and unclear, at best. In this way, the doctrine’s unintelligibility renders it untenable.

The third and most sophisticated objection against eternal generation is the *subordinationism objection*. Detractors such as William Lane Craig (2003) and Keith Yandall (2009; 2014) contend that the doctrine of eternal generation entails subordinationism, the view that the Son is not fully divine. In particular, the Son lacks two divine attributes: necessary existence and self-existence (aseity). The Son lacks *necessary existence* because the Son, as Craig puts it, “becomes an effect contingent upon the Father.”\(^8\) Depending on the Father for his existence might seem to impinge on the Son’s necessary existence. Moreover, the Son lacks self-existence or *aseity* because he exists in virtue of the Father. Aseity, according to Yandall (2014), is “the property *existing without being caused by anything else.*”\(^9\) On

\[^6\] For starters, see Giles (2012).
\[^7\] Erickson (2009: 184). Later (2009: 251) he asserts that the doctrine is “meaningless” and “does not make sense philosophically.” Driscoll and Breshears (2010: 28) similarly complain that, “the term ‘begotten’ could never be defined with any clarity, so it was of little use.”
\[^8\] Craig (2003).
the doctrine of eternal generation, he contends, the Father acts and the Son results, which implies that the Son causally depends on the Father. Since the Son causally depends on the Father, the Son lacks aseity. Instead, the Son possesses what he calls “next door to aseity—aseity regarding every being but one.”\(^\text{10}\) Craig (2003) states the worry more generally, without reference to causal dependence: “Even if this eternal procession takes place necessarily and apart from the Father’s will, the Son is less than the Father because the Father alone exists \textit{a se}, whereas the Son exists through another (\textit{ab alio}).”\(^\text{11}\) Craig’s suggestion seems to be that if the Son exists in virtue of the Father in any sense (causal or otherwise), then the Son lacks aseity. Granted that aseity and necessary existence are divine attributes, it follows that the Son is less than fully divine. Eternal generation thus entails subordinationism.

3 The Essential Dependence Model

Before diving into the details of the essential dependence model of eternal generation, some remarks about the account of essence that I presuppose are necessary. I favor a definitional account of essence on which essence is taken as primitive. That is to say, essence cannot be analyzed in modal or any other terms. The essence of an entity is simply \textit{what the entity is}, or \textit{what it is to be the entity}. Although primitive, essence may be elucidated using the notion of real definition. A \textit{real definition} is a proposition representing the essence of an entity. In a real definition, the definiens will characterize the essence of the definiendum; the definiens will characterize what the definiendum is, or what it is to be the definiendum. Real definitions typically take the form \textit{<To be x is to be y>}, where ‘x’ is the definiendum.

\(^{10}\) Yandall (2014).
\(^{11}\) Craig (2003).
and ‘y’ is the definiens. For example, consider the Aristotelian real definition of a human being: <To be a human being is to be a rational animal>.\(^\text{12}\) The definiendum represents an entity (a human being) and the definiens likewise represents an entity (a rational animal). Notice that the definiens specifies both a genus and a differentia or differentiating feature. In this case the definiens specifies the genus, animal, and the differentia, rationality. When combined, the genus and differentia characterize the essence of the definiendum. What it is to be a human being is just to be a rational animal; that’s the essence of humanity, on the Aristotelian view.

Essential dependence, like essence, is best understood in terms of real definition. Essential dependence holds when the essence of an entity involves another entity; one entity is part of what it is to be another entity.\(^\text{13}\) Or, in terms of real definition, essential dependence holds when one entity is a constituent of a real definition of another entity.\(^\text{14}\) Where ‘y’ and ‘x’ represent entities from any ontological category, essential dependence may be formulated as follows:

_Essential Dependence:_

\[ y \text{ essentially depends on } x =_d f x \text{ is a constituent of a real definition of } y. \]

For example, non-empty sets essentially depend on their members. Take Obama and his singleton. \{Obama\} essentially depends on Obama. The essence of \{Obama\} involves


\(^{13}\) For an opinionated introduction to essential dependence, see Koslicki (2013).

\(^{14}\) I use the indefinite article ‘a’ so as to leave open the possibility that an entity may have multiple equally accurate real definitions.

Obama in such a way that Obama is a constituent of a real definition of \{Obama\}. To be \{Obama\} is to be a collection containing Obama as its sole member that satisfies the axioms of set theory. Obama is part of what is to be \{Obama\}.

On my essential dependence model of eternal generation, eternal generation is a form of essential dependence. To say that the Son is begotten of the Father is just to say that the Son essentially depends on the Father. More formally:

\textit{Essential Dependence Model:}

The Son is eternally begotten of the Father = df. The Father is a constituent of a real definition of the Son, and the Son exists eternally.

According the essential dependence model, the essence of the Son involves the Father. The Father is part of what the Son is, or what it is to be the Son. A real definition of the Son will be of the form <To be the Son is to be the divine person who ______ the Father>, where the blank is to be filled in by some description characterizing the Son’s essence. Note that the Son, like the Father and the Spirit, falls under the genus divine person; once filled in, the blank will help specify the differentia, what differentiates the Son from the other Persons.

To fill out the real definition of the Son, we will consult Scripture. Of all the descriptions of the Son in the Old and New Testaments, it seems to me that the following verses characterize the essence of the Son, or what it is to be the Son:\footnote{All translations are taken from the English Standard Version. Emphasis added.}

“He is \textit{the image of the invisible God}, the firstborn of all creation.” (Colossians 1:15)

“…who, though he was \textit{in the form of God}, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped….” (Philippians 2:6)

“He is the radiance of the glory of God and \textit{the exact imprint of his nature}….” (Hebrews 1:3)
“...Christ, who is the image of God.” (2 Corinthians 4:4)

Without getting into exegetical tangles about these excerpts, these verses suggest that to be the Son is to be the divine person who is the image of the Father. The essence of the Son involves being the image of the Father; being the image of the Father is part of what it is to be the Son. In this way, the Father is a constituent of a real definition of the Son, and so the Son essentially depends on the Father.

For the essential dependence model to succeed, the Father cannot essentially depend on the Son. A real definition of the Father must be found in which the Son is not a constituent, so as to show that the essence of the Father does not involve the Son. The form of such a real definition will be <To be the Father is to be the divine person _______>, where the blank is to be filled in by some description characterizing the Father’s essence. Once again we consult Scripture to fill out the real definition of the Father:17

“For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist...” (Hebrews 2:10)

“For from him and through him and to him are all things.” (Romans 11:36)

“...yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.” (1 Corinthians 8:6)

Taken together, these verses suggest that to be the Father is to be the divine person on whom all things ultimately depend.18 All things, created or not, ultimately depend on the Father. Creation causally depends on the Father, but not all things depend on the Father causally. Most notably, the Son does not causally depend on the Father, yet the Son still depends on

17 Compare the words of the Apostle Paul at the Areopagus in Acts 17.
18 I use ‘things’ here in the most general sense of the word, equivalent to ‘entities’. The quantifier ‘all’ is restricted only to exclude the Father so that the Father doesn’t essentially depend on himself.
the Father. That is, the Son essentially depends on the Father. To be the Father is to be the divine person on whom all things ultimately depend, causally or otherwise.19

4 Objections Avoided

With the essential dependence model in place, all that remains is to demonstrate how it avoids the unintelligibility and subordinationism objections. First, the unintelligibility objection. Though plenty of philosophers reject the notion of essential dependence, they do not typically reject it on the grounds that it is unintelligible. Essential dependence has been widely regarded as meaningful and philosophically coherent for millennia, dating back to Aristotle, at least. And if essential dependence is meaningful and philosophically coherent in other cases, there is no principled reason why it should not be meaningful and philosophically coherent in this case. So the unintelligibility objection poses no credible threat to the essential dependence model of eternal generation.

The essential dependence model likewise escapes the subordinationism objection. According to the subordinationism objection, the doctrine of eternal generation entails that the Son lacks the divine attributes of necessary existence and aseity. Yet essential dependence is perfectly compatible with necessary existence. To illustrate, consider the number 2 and its singleton. The number 2 necessarily exists and so does its singleton, {2}. Nevertheless, {2} essentially depends on the number 2, since the number 2 is a constituent of a real definition of {2}. Essential dependence is thus entirely consistent with the Son’s

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19 Alternatively, one could define the Father as the divine person who is the ultimate source of all things. However, the term ‘source’ is misleading, suggesting that the Father is the causal source of all things. In any case, my proposed real definition may require reconceiving Fatherhood, though not in a way that is without exegetical support.
necessary existence. Similarly, essential dependence poses no threat to the Son’s aseity. Yandall (2014) defines aseity in causal terms, as the property of existing without being caused by anything else. Essential dependence, though, in no way implies that the Father causes the Son to exist. Essential dependence is form of non-causal dependence and is thereby consistent with the aseity of the Son.

Detractors like Craig (2003) might reply that aseity should be defined more generally in terms of dependence. Aseity is not the property of existing without being caused by anything else; rather, it is the property of existing without depending on anything else.20 The Son essentially depends on the Father, so it follows that the Son does not truly possess aseity. At best, the Son possesses “next door to aseity—austerity regarding every being but one.” In rejoinder, proponents of the essential dependence model may invoke the accepted distinction between the divine essence (ousia) and the person (hypostasis) of the Son. By invoking this distinction, we can maintain that the Son possesses aseity with respect to the divine essence, but not with respect to his person.21 Here we can emulate John Calvin:

Therefore we say that the deity in an absolute sense exists of itself; whence likewise we confess that the Son since he is God, exists of himself, but not in respect of his Person; indeed, since he is the Son, we say that he exists from the Father. Thus his essence is without beginning; while the beginning of his person is God himself.22

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20 Although I grant this more general conception of aseity for the sake of argument, it strikes me as unmotivated. It’s not clear why aseity should preclude all forms of dependence. Modal existential dependence seems perfectly benign, for instance, and I see no obvious reason why essential dependence should compromise the Son’s aseity.

21 In other words, the Son essentially depends on the Father with respect to his individual essence—not with respect to his general essence. The Father is a constituent of a real definition of the Son’s individual essence (i.e., what it is to be the Son as opposed to the Father or the Spirit), but the Father is not a constituent of a real definition of the Son’s general essence (i.e., what it is to be a divine person). See Lowe (2008: 35) for the distinction between individual and general essence.

Because the Son possesses aseity with respect to the divine essence, he possesses something greater than “next door to aseity.” Admittedly, the Son does not possess aseity with respect to his person, as opposed to the Father, who possesses aseity both with respect to the divine essence and with respect to his person. But it is not at all clear that this difference entails that the Son is not fully divine. Detractors must supply additional argument to show why the Son must possess aseity with respect to his person—not just aseity with respect to the divine essence—in order to qualify as fully divine.

The essential dependence model of eternal generation, I have argued, avoids standard philosophical and theological objections to the doctrine of eternal generation. In the end, the doctrine of eternal generation, like all other doctrines, stands or falls with Scripture. My model shows that eternal generation is philosophically coherent and theologically sound. If there are good reasons to reject eternal generation (and I don’t think there are), they won’t be philosophical.

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When we speak simply of the Son without regard to the Father, we well and properly declare him to be of himself; and for this reason we call him the sole beginning. But when we mark the relation that he has with the Father, we rightly make the Father the beginning of the Son.
References:


