

USAGE STATEMENT & AGREEMENT

- **This document is the property of the author(s) and of www.epsociety.org.**
- **This document has been made available for your individual usage.**
- **It's possible that the ideas contained in this document are of a "preprint" quality. Please consult the author(s) for any updated content.**
- **If you quote from this document, whether for personal or professional purposes, please give appropriate attribution and link to the original URL whenever you cite it.**
- **Please do not upload or store this document to any personal or organization owned website, intranet, portal, server, FTP area, or any other shared space.**
- **You are permitted to store this document on your own individual, privately-owned computer or device.**
- **By opening this document, you have agreed to abide by the above stated usage policy.**
- ***We welcome your comments and interaction about the ideas shared in this document by going to www.epsociety.org!***

An Examination of Recent Philosophical Responses to Thomas McCall's Argument Against Eternal Functional Subordination

Christopher G. Woznicki
Department of Theology
Fuller Theological Seminary
Pasadena, CA

Abstract: Since Thomas McCall first published *Which Trinity? Whose Monotheism? Philosophical and Systematic Theologians on the Metaphysics of the Trinity* in 2010 numerous papers have been written responding to his philosophical arguments against eternal functional subordination. Among recent philosophical responses to McCall's position a paper co-written by Philip Gons and Andrew Naselli and another by Bruce Ware stand out as the most significant. Gons and Naselli argue that McCall's argument conflates the term "essentially" with "belonging to the essence." Ware puts forth a *reductio ad absurdum* argument against McCall and shows McCall's logic entails a denial of *homoousios*. This paper enters into this debate by examining Gons and Naselli's argument. It engages with recent philosophical literature dealing with the meaning of the term "essence" in order to show that their argument against McCall is unfounded. The paper then turns to Ware's argument to show that he has made a category mistake in comparing the property of being eternally begotten and the property of being functionally subordinate in all time segments in all possible worlds. Having critically examined these recent philosophical responses to McCall we see that McCall's argument still holds up against its objectors.

Introduction

In the summer of 2016 we witnessed an intense debate between those who affirm the eternal functional subordination of the Son to the Father and those who only affirm the economic subordination of the Son the Father. What made this debate unique was that it was primarily carried out over blogs and social media. This online debate began with three posts on the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals website posted between June 3rd and June 6th. In two blogs, Liam Goligher, the Senior Minister of 10th Presbyterian Church of Philadelphia, concluded that to affirm eternal functional subordination

represents a departure from Christian orthodoxy and a move towards idolatry.¹ In another blog Carl Trueman, professor at Westminster Theological Seminary, wrote that those who hold to the eternal subordination of the Son wander outside the bounds of Nicene Orthodoxy.² With these three initial posts a flurry of discussions began online with people either supporting or rebutting Goligher and Trueman's arguments. This online debate generated responses from a varied cast of characters including: Scot McKnight, Michael Bird, Denny Burk, Darren Sumner, Owen Strachan, Michel Barnes, Lewis Ayres, Fred Sanders, Matthew Emerson, Wayne Grudem, and Bruce Ware. What began as a series of blog posts exploded into an intense debate online. This debate has even drawn the attention of the Evangelical Theological Society, whose conference theme this year is the Trinity. In response to this debate ETS has added a special section which will allow the key players in this debate to interact.

Although the debate took on a new platform in June 2016, by no means is this debate new. In the early 2000's the debate had been carried out across various books, academic journals, and even live debates. However, a watershed moment in this debate came in 2010 with publication of Thomas McCall's monograph, *Which Trinity? Whose Monotheism? Philosophical and Systematic Theologians on the Metaphysics of the Trinity*. There McCall made a philosophical argument against EFS which since its inception has been taken as the standard philosophical argument to which all responses of the EFS position must account for.³ McCall's argument has received various responses throughout the years, but among recent philosophical responses to McCall's argument two essays stand out. Both of these essays can be found in the book *One God in Three Persons: Unity of Essence, Distinction of Persons, Implications for Life*; a book dedicated to defending EFS on biblical, historical, and philosophical terms. In the first essay Philip Gons and Andrew Naselli argue that McCall's argument

¹ Liam Goligher, "Is it Okay to Teach a Complementarianism Based on Eternal Subordination," *Mortification of Spin* (blog), June 3, 2016

<http://www.alliancenet.org/mos/housewife-theologian/is-it-okay-to-teach-a-complementarianism-based-on-eternal-subordination#.V5KhsGaeM3p> and Liam Goligher, "Reinventing God," *Mortification of Spin* (blog), June 6, 2016,

<http://www.alliancenet.org/mos/housewife-theologian/reinventing-god#.V5KhuGaeM3q>

² Carl Trueman, "Fahrenheit 381," *Mortification of Spin* (blog), June 7, 2016, <http://www.alliancenet.org/mos/postcards-from-palookaville/fahrenheit-381#.V5KfpGaeM3r>

³ For a similar argument see, Keith Yandell, "How Many Times Does Three Go into One?" in *Philosophical and Theological Essays on the Trinity*, ed. Thomas McCall and Michael C. Rea (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

conflates the term “essentially” with belonging to the essence. In the second essay Bruce Ware employs a *reductio ad absurdum* argument against McCall to show that McCall’s logic makes it so that affirming eternal generation entails a denial of *homoousios*.

I here respond to these two arguments. I show that Gons and Naselli’s claim that McCall conflates terms is unfounded. I also show that Ware makes a category mistake in comparing the property of being eternally begotten and the property of being eternally functionally subordinate. By critically examining these recent philosophical responses to McCall we see that McCall’s argument still holds up against its objectors. However, before we turn to these responses we must describe how both sides of this debate use the relevant terms.

The Terms of the Debate

One major aspect of this debate concerns the definition of the term “Eternal Functional Subordination” Although there is a need to critically examine various definitions of this term, for the purposes of this paper it will suffice to say how the particular players in the McCall vs. Contributors to *One God in Three Persons* debate use the term.

In this debate Gons and Naselli, and to a certain extent Ware, take McCall’s definition as the starting point for their own definitions. McCall’s defines Hard EFS as:

Hard EFS: The Son is functionally subordinate to the Father in all time segments in all possible worlds; there are no time segments in any possible world in which the Son is not subordinate to the Father.⁴

Gons and Naselli modify McCall’s definition and define “Hard EFS” as:

Gons and Naselli Hard EFS: The Son is eternally and necessarily subordinate to the Father, not in terms of deity, but in his role in relationship to the Father.⁵

⁴ Thomas H. McCall, *Which Trinity? Whose Monotheism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), p. 178.

⁵ Philip R. Gons and Andrew David Naselli, “An Examination of Three Recent Philosophical Arguments against Hierarchy in the Immanent Trinity” in *One God in Three Persons*, ed. Bruce Ware and John Starke, (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), p. 197.

Although Gons and Naselli believe their definition is clearer than McCall's, for the sake of argument they are comfortable⁶ using McCall's definition of Hard EFS.⁷

Having stated how the term EFS⁸ is commonly used we can now turn to the arguments put forth in this debate.

Gons and Naselli's Argument

McCall's argument against EFS in *Which Trinity? Whose Monotheism* is by far the most influential philosophical argument against EFS.⁹ In his argument McCall puts forward the position that EFS entails the denial of *homoousion*. If this is in fact true, i.e. the Father and Son are not of the same essence (*homoousios*) but of different essences (*heteroousios*), then historic orthodox creedal Trinitarianism is lost. After stating the potential consequences of the EFS position McCall proceeds to provide a philosophical argument¹⁰ for why this is so:¹¹

- 1) If Hard EFS is true, then the Son has the property of *being functionally subordinate in all time segments in all possible worlds*.
- 2) If the Son has this property in every possible world, then the Son has this property necessarily. Furthermore, the Son has this property with *de re* rather than *de dicto* necessity.
- 3) If the Son has this property necessarily (*de re*), then the Son has it essentially.

⁶ Similarly, Bruce Ware puts forth his own definition EFS (which he prefers to call "Eternal Relational Authority Submission"). However, for the sake argument he is also comfortable in using McCall's definition of Hard EFS. Bruce Ware, "Does Affirming an Eternal Authority-Submission Relationship in the Trinity Entail a Denial of *Homoousios*?" in *One God in Three Persons*, ed. Bruce Ware and John Starke, (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), p. 237.

⁷ McCall's definition introduces some unhelpful complications by introducing the concept of time. There may be a less complicated and more concise way to restate McCall's definition of Hard EFS, for example: Hard EFS₁: The Son is functionally subordinate necessarily (*de re*) to the Father.

⁸ Hereafter, EFS will stand for what we mean by Hard EFS.

⁹ Again, Keith Yandell's argument in "How Many Times Does Three Go into One" should be noted for its philosophical sophistication, however Yandell's argument has not generated as many responses as McCall's.

¹⁰ Let us call this the "Denial of *Homoousios* Argument."

¹¹ McCall, *Which Trinity? Whose Monotheism?*, pp. 179-80.

4) If Hard EFS is true, then the Son has this property essentially while the Father does not.

5) If the Son has this property essentially and the Father does not, then the Son is of a different essence than the Father. Thus the Son is *heteroousios* rather than *homoousios*.

At first glance this argument appears to be philosophically devastating for the logic seems valid and it seems as though all of the premises are premises which proponents of EFS would also affirm. However, upon closer examination one sees that the argument is not valid. McCall needs to affirm the antecedent of the first premise to get his intended result. This flaw in his logic is not fatal, it can easily be corrected by adding a premise after (3), something like (3)₁: Proponents of Hard EFS believe Hard EFS is true. Nevertheless, Gons and Naselli recognize the force of McCall's argument and the potential McCall's argument has for undermining the EFS position. However, they believe that McCall's argument fails at one crucial point, namely McCall's understanding of the term "essentially." Gons and Naselli attempt to undermine McCall's argument by challenging premise (3), arguing that McCall is sloppy with his use of the word "essentially." Gons and Naselli believe that he conflates the word "essentially" with "belonging to the essence."¹² They argue that the terms "essentially" and "essence" in McCall's argument need clarification. According to them, the fact that these words share the same root (*esse*), is the cause of the confusion. They believe that substituting the terms "fundamentally" for "essentially" and "substance" for "essence" would help to bring clarity. They go on to restate McCall's conclusion (5) using the terms they provide:

5)₁) If the Son has this property fundamentally and the Father does not, then the Son is of a different substance than the Father. Thus the Son is *heteroousios* rather than *homoousios*.

They claim that this version of (5) does not lead to the unwanted conclusion, for saying that there is a fundamental property difference between the Father and the Son does not necessarily entail that the Father and Son are not consubstantial. It is not clear what one should do with their given claim. Gons and Naselli believe they are clarifying the ambiguity in McCall's original argument. But Gons and Naselli never provide a definition of a "fundamental

¹² Let us call this the "Essence-Essential Property Argument."

property.” The reader is left to her own devices to figure out what they mean by this term. Without some further explanation it is difficult to know whether or not they are right about their claim. Until they provide an explanation of what they mean by “fundamental property” it is not clear that one can simply replace the term “essentially” with “fundamentally” in (5₁).

Despite their ambiguous attempt to replace the term “essentially” with “fundamentally,” the core of Gons and Naselli’s argument concerns the nature of essences and essential properties. Specifically, it concerns the questions: “What makes something an essential property?” and “How is an essential property related to the essence of a thing?” Whatever one makes of those questions will determine whether or not there is a problem with premise (3).

So what does it mean for something to be an essential property? Consider the following commonly used definitions of an essential property:

Essential Property₁: *P* is an essential property of an object *o* just in case it is necessary that *o* has *P*.¹³

Essential Property₂: *P* is an essential property of an object *o* just in case *o* has *P* in all possible world.¹⁴

Essential Property₃: *P* is an essential property of an object *o* just in case it is locally necessary that *o* has *P* if there are facts about *o*.¹⁵

Essential Property₄: *P* is an essential property of an object *o* just in case (1) it is necessary that *o* has *P* if *o* exists, and (2) if nothing had *P*, then *o* would not exist.¹⁶

Consider Alvin Plantinga’s explanation of an essential property: “Something has a property essentially if and only if it has it and could not possibly have lacked it. Another way to put the same thing is to say that an object *x* has the property *P* essentially if and only if *x* has it in every possible world in which *x* exists.”¹⁷ We may also consider E.J. Lowe’s account: “an essential property of

¹³ Robertson, Teresa and Atkins, Philip, “Essential vs. Accidental Properties”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2016/entries/essential-accidental/>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Alvin Plantinga, “Essence and Essentialism,” in *A Companion to Metaphysics*, ed. Jaegwon Kim and Ernest Sosa (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), p. 138.

an object is a property which that object always possesses and which it could not have failed to possess – in other words, in the language of possible worlds, it is a property which that object possesses at all times in every possible world in which it exists.”¹⁸

Although these definitions vary quite a bit, what is common to all of them is that they make the claim that to say that an object *o* has *P* means that *o* could not lack *P* without failing to be *o*. For example, we may say that Thomas McCall has the essential property of being a human. This means Thomas could not lack the property of being human without being Thomas. However, Thomas could have the property of being bald, yet this is not the sort of property of which we would say that Thomas would fail to be Thomas if he lacked “baldness.”

Now consider what meant by “essence.” An Aristotelian account of essence provides that an essence is the property or set of properties that make an object what it is and without which it would lose its identity.

Essence₁: *Q* is the essence of an object *o* just in case it is necessary that *o* has *Q*.

In other words, for Aristotle essences are those properties of the objects without which the object ceases to be what it is. Another common conception of an essence is provided by Leibniz, who defines an essence according to a substance’s *complete individual concept* which contains all predicates true of its past, present, and future. That is, the essence of an object is the set of predicates which are sufficient to allow us to deduce from the set of predicates of the object to which object these predicates are attributed to.

Essence₂: *Q* is the essence of an object *o* just in the case that *Q* is the set of properties necessary to identify *o* from among all other existing objects.

In light of these definitions it does not seem clear how Gons and Naselli may separate the concepts of essential properties and essences, arguing that McCall is being slippery in his use of the terms. This is because being essential property simply means that the property belongs to that object’s essence.

Let us now apply our understanding of an essential property to McCall’s conclusion (5):

¹⁸ E.J. Lowe, *A Survey of Metaphysics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 96.

5₂) If the Son has a property essentially (has *P* in all possible worlds) and the Father does not (does not have *P* in all possible worlds), then the Son is of a different essence than the Father. Thus the Son is *heteroousios* rather than *homoousios*.

This conclusion is clearly true, for if the Son has *P* essentially and the Father does not have *P* essentially then the Father and Son do not share essential properties. Given our discussion of the relationship between essential properties and essences above, this would make it impossible to say that they are of the same essence. Thus Gons and Naselli's objection that "one must prove rather than assume the move from 'essentially' to 'essence'" fails.

Although their Essence-Essential Property Argument fails, there is still a response that Gons and Naselli could make to this argument. They may respond that the property of being in submission under the Father is a property which is a unique incommunicable property of the person that defines their intra-Trinitarian relationships.¹⁹ They may want to say that this property, like the property of being eternally generated, is an essential property possessed by the Son but not possessed by the Father. Thus it seems as though there is at least one property that the Son has essentially but the Father does not (i.e. being eternally generated), yet no one claims this to be a denial of *homoousion*. This potentially important objection to McCall's argument against EFS it is not fully developed by Gons and Naselli. Bruce Ware, on the other hand, fully develops this argument in "Does Affirming an Eternal Authority-Submission Relationship Entail the Denial of *Homoousios*?" We shall now turn our attention to Bruce Ware's argument.

Bruce Ware's Argument

Bruce Ware begins by noting that the key idea in McCall's "Denial of *Homoousios* Argument" is the notion that attributing to the Son a property that is essential to him as Son, but one not also shared with the Father, entails that the Son has a different essence than the Father, and hence the Son cannot be *homoousios* with the Father."²⁰ He states that if EFS advocates succumb to claim of *heteroousios* based on the "Denial of *Homoousios*" argument then those who follow Athanasius and the framers of the Nicene Creed will succumb to *heteroousios* as well. Ware argues that according to the traditional construction of Trinitarian doctrine, the Son does possess a unique property that the Father

¹⁹ Ibid., 205

²⁰ Bruce Ware, "Does Affirming an Eternal Authority-Submission Relationship in the Trinity Entail a Denial of *Homoousios*?", p. 241.

does not. What property is this? It is that the Son uniquely and necessarily possesses the property of being eternally begotten by the Father. Because the Son possesses this property with *de re* necessity and not *de dicto* necessity, the Son possesses a property which is essential to the Son alone and not essential to the Father. In order to show why this is potentially devastating for the “Denial of *Homoousios* Argument” Ware takes the same structure of McCall’s argument and replaces *being functionally subordinate in all time segments in all possible worlds* with a premise about eternal generation.²¹ Thus Ware’s argument:

6) If one holds that the Son is eternally begotten by the Father while the Father is eternally unbegotten, then it follows that the Son has a property that is essential to him (viz., the property of being eternally begotten) that the Father does not also possess.

7) But if the Son has a property essential to him as Son which property the Father does not also possess, then it follows that the Son has an essence that is different from the essence of the Father.

8) And if the Son’s essence is different from the Father’s essence, it follows that the Son cannot be *homoousios* (i.e. of the identically same essence) with the Father.

9) Therefore, to hold that the Son is eternally begotten by the Father entails a denial of *homoousios*.²²

Once one gets past the fact that the logic of his argument is not valid,²³ it seems as though Ware’s counter-argument poses a major problem for McCall’s argument. Ware’s argument is intended as a *reductio ad absurdum*, since those who affirm Athanasius and Nicaea’s Trinitarian theology and affirm that the Son is eternally begotten would not want to affirm what is entailed by this argument, namely that eternal generation entails a denial of *homoousios*.

Given the strength of Ware’s argument opponents of EFS have several options. First, they can choose to recognize the strength of Ware’s Argument.

²¹ Let us call this the “EFS – Eternal Generation Argument.”

²² Bruce Ware, “Does Affirming an Eternal Authority-Submission Relationship in the Trinity Entail a Denial of *Homoousios*?”, p. 242

²³ In order to make the argument valid one needs to have a premise affirming the antecedent of (6). Perhaps one can say something like: “The Son has the property of being eternally begotten by the Father, while the Father has the property of being eternally unbegotten.”

If they believe that eternal generation is vital to our doctrine of the Trinity they can give in and accept the EFS position or if they believe EFS is unacceptable they can choose to deny eternal generation. However, for many opponents of EFS neither of these options are acceptable.

There are still other options for EFS opponents. An EFS opponent could respond to Ware by saying that his argument simply does not work because the property of *being eternally begotten* is just not the same kind of property as *being functionally subordinate in all time segments in all possible worlds*. The former is a “personal property”²⁴ which belongs to the persons of the Trinity and is possessed by only one person. The latter is not, for the Holy Spirit is also eternally functionally subordinate to the Father. However, Ware may respond by providing a more nuanced definition of eternal functional subordination. Ware could say that the Son has the property of *being functionally subordinate as Son in all time segments in all possible worlds*. This would make functional subordination a personal property of the Son alone.

Yet there is at least one more option left open to those who want to oppose Ware’s counter-argument. This group may want to argue that the property of being *eternally generated* is not ontologically the same kind of property as *being functionally subordinate as Son in all time segments in all possible worlds* because in the grand tradition of church reflection upon the Trinity the former has been considered to be person-constituting property, whereas the latter is not. For instance, consider how William Lane Craig, a proponent of EFS, recognizes the difference between person-constituting properties and non-person-constituting properties in the work of Augustine:

Augustine claims that the distinction between Father and Son is a matter neither of different essential properties nor of different accidental properties. Rather the persons are distinguished in virtue of the relations in which they stand...Augustine thinks that properties like begotten by God cannot belong to anything’s essence...only intrinsic properties go to constitute something’s essence.²⁵

Craig also recognizes this distinction in the work of Aquinas:

Aquinas holds that the different divine persons just are the different relations in God, like paternity (being father of) and filiation (being son

²⁴ See McCall, *Which Trinity? Whose Monotheism?*, p. 184.

²⁵ J.P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2003), p. 585.

of) (Summa Theologiae 1a.40.2)... Aquinas regards these relations as subsisting entities in God (Scg 4.14.6,11).²⁶

Craig recognizes that for both Augustine and Aquinas (along with most of the Western Tradition) there is a radical ontological difference between these relational properties (paternity, filiation, spiration) which are person constituting relations and non-person constituting properties. Yet Ware decides to treat the property of *being functionally subordinate as Son in all time segments in all possible worlds* as the same sort of property as filiation. The great tradition has never done this, and for good reason. One reason being that that the property of being functionally subordinate requires that there already exists a substance to which the property can be predicated. However eternal generation is not the sort of property which is predicated of a subject, rather it constitutes the subject to which other properties are predicated. In order for Ware's argument to work he would have to do one of two things: 1) Show that eternal functional subordination is person constituting in the same way that filiation is or 2) Show that we ought to abandon the concept of a person constituting property. Whichever route Ware decides to take; these options require him to move away from the great tradition of Trinitarian reflection. Thus the burden is on him to show what reasons we have for doing this. Until Ware gives sufficient reasons for why we ought to do this by taking option 1 or option 2, McCall's argument stands.

Conclusion

In this brief essay we examined the "Essence-Essential Property Argument" and the "EFS-Eternal Generation Argument" and have seen that both fall short of their intended goals. As it stands, McCall's argument has not yet been adequately challenged. That is not to say that McCall's argument is impenetrable, yet it seems as though EFS advocates will need to develop other arguments in order to debunk the "Denial of *Homoousios* Argument."

Christopher G. Woznicki is a Ph.D. student in the Department of Theology at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, CA.

²⁶ Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*, p. 586.