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Naturalism, classical theism, and first causes

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Abstract

Enric F. Gel has recently argued that classical theism enjoys a significant advantage over Graham Oppy's naturalism. According to Gel, classical theism – unlike Oppy's naturalism – satisfactorily answers two questions: first, *how many* first causes are there, and second, *why* is it *that* number rather than another? In this article, I reply to Gel's argument for classical theism's advantage over Oppy's naturalism. I also draw out wider implications of my investigation for the gap problem and Christian doctrine along the way.

Keywords: Classical theism; first cause; gap problem; god; naturalism

Introduction

Classical theism is unique among models of God in that it affirms four core theses: divine simplicity, timelessness, immutability, and impassibility. According to the Doctrine of Divine Simplicity (DDS), God has no physical, metaphysical, or logical parts. Traditionally, this is taken to entail that in God there is no distinction between essence and existence, subject and accidents, individual and essence, individual and properties, act and potency, and agent and the agent's actions.[1] Instead, God *is* God's essence. God *is* his existence. God lacks accidents in the sense of intrinsic contingent features. God lacks properties in the sense of exemplifiables distinct from himself. God is purely actual, lacking any potential for change or cross-world variance. And God is identical to each of his acts. Such are the commitments of the traditional DDS.

It will be useful to define 'part' before proceeding. At least in the context of DDS, a *part* of God would be any positive ontological item *intrinsic* to but *distinct* from God.[2] Thus, according to DDS, '[a]nything intrinsic to God is identical to God' (Fakhri (2021), 10). Vallicella (2019) puts it equivalently: 'God is ontologically simple ... there is nothing intrinsic to God that is distinct from God.' Other scholars follow suit.[3]

While much more can be said, that suffices for present purposes as a characterization of classical theism – or, at least, the *version* of classical theism with which I am here concerned. Let's now consider a view on the opposite end of the metaphysical spectrum: *Oppy's naturalism*.

Naturalism is variously characterized. Our focus here is *Oppy's naturalism*, which has been particularly influential in philosophy of religion.[4] In its most recent and well-

developed articulation (Pearce and Oppy (2022), ch. 2), Oppy's naturalism makes several core claims. Five important and characteristic such claims are:

(1) *Natural reality exhausts causal reality*: Every causal entity and causal property is natural, where *natural* causal entities and properties are those 'recognized in ideal, completed, true science' (*ibid.*, 103).

(2) *Mindedness is late and local*: Minded beings are either relatively recently evolved organisms or products of such organisms.

(3) *Nothing is divine*: Nothing causal is divine, sacred, or worship-worthy.

(4) *Shared history*: Necessarily, any possible way causal reality could be shares an initial history (i.e. an initial world segment) with actual causal reality. In other words, for any possible causal reality, its history at some point coincides with actual history. Oppy thus affirms that 'every possible world shares some initial history with the actual world', which we can call natural causal reality's 'initial state' or 'initial singularity' (*ibid.*, 222).

(5) *Chance divergence*: Necessarily, the only way that possible causal histories diverge or branch from actual causal history is through objectively chancy events.

Having characterized the two world-views being compared, let's get clear on my target. In a recent article, Enric F. Gel argues that 'precisely because of its picture of God as a purely actual first cause of things', classical theism enjoys 'a significant advantage over' Oppy's naturalism as a theory of the first cause (Gel (forthcoming), 2).[5] Gel offers two argumentative paths in favour of this claim: 'one where causal finitism is granted' and another 'where a foundational layer of reality is granted' (*ibid.*). Gel's arguments advance debates about classical theism, the gap problem, and the comparison of rival theories in philosophy of religion. Ultimately, however, I do not find the arguments convincing. My task in this article is to explain why.

I begin by examining Gel's first argumentative path from causal finitism. Then I examine Gel's second argumentative path from a foundational layer of reality. I next examine two arguments that *non-classical theisms* enjoy the same advantage that – according to Gel – accrues to classical theism over Oppy's naturalism. Along the way, I also draw out wider implications of my investigation for both the gap problem and the Christian doctrine of Trinitarianism.

Gel's first argumentative path

Methodology

Causal finitism says that infinite causal histories are metaphysically impossible.[6] If we rule out circles of causation, causal finitism – together with the relatively innocuous claim that *something* is a cause – straightforwardly entails that there is at least one uncaused first cause. At this juncture, Gel raises the following questions: first, *how many* first causes are there? And second, *why* are there exactly that many?

According to Gel, there are two possible answers to the second question: either (a) 'it's a brute fact with no explanation', or (b) 'it's a necessary fact that could not have been otherwise' (Gel (forthcoming), 3). It's not clear that this is right, however. Gel is importing both explanatory and modal notions into the answers to the second question. Given this, there are four permutations of possible answers: (i) it is a contingent, unexplained fact; (ii) it is a contingent, (non-causally) explained fact; (iii) it is a necessary, unexplained fact; and (iv) it is a necessary, (non-causally) explained fact.[7] Ideally, we want our theory to answer (ii) or (iv), as these alone offer a gain in theoretical explanatoriness; moreover, we want

the resultant gain in explanatoriness *not* to be outweighed by a cost in theoretical complexity.

Regarding the first question, Gel writes that 'due to Ockham's Razor, out of two equally explanatorily efficacious accounts, we should prefer that which posits fewer entities and is, hence, simpler' (*ibid.*, 3). But Ockham's Razor doesn't *merely* advise us to posit fewer *entities*. It *also* advises us to posit fewer *kinds* of entities. (As Da Vee (2020) articulates it, Ockham's Razor enjoins us 'to not multiple entities (*or kinds of entities*) without necessity' (*ibid.*, 3679, emphasis added).) The former relates to a theory's *quantitative* simplicity, whereas the latter relates to its *qualitative* or *categorical* simplicity. Moreover, given that Gel is critiquing Oppy, we must also take into account the three elements of simplicity Oppy employs to assess theories:

(1) *Ontological simplicity*: All else being equal, a world-view committed to fewer things and fewer kinds of things is superior to one committed to more things and more kinds of things (Pearce and Oppy (2022), 115).

(2) *Ideological simplicity*: All else being equal, a world-view employing fewer undefined primitive expressions is superior to one employing more undefined primitive expressions (*ibid.*).

(3) *Theoretical simplicity*: All else being equal, a world-view committed to fewer and less complicated fundamental principles is superior to one committed to more and more complicated fundamental principles (*ibid.*).[8]

With all these methodological points covered, we can now turn to Gel's main argument. I'll begin by examining the role of simplicity therein.

Simplicity

Gel nicely outlines his overall argument as follows:

> [T]he advantage I want to ascribe to the pure-act theist's candidate for a First Cause is that, by adopting it, we are able to (1) get an answer to the question of how many First Causes there are; (2) explain why there is that number rather than another (namely, as we'll see below, because there can be no other) and (3) such a number could not possibly be lower. (Gel (forthcoming), 3)

The classical theist's answer to the question in (1) is obviously *one*. According to Gel, this also establishes (3), since *one* is the 'simplest possible answer' (*ibid.*). But this is not so clear given the abovementioned methodological points. For simplicity isn't merely a matter of the fewest *number of entities* posited (i.e. the quantitative simplicity element of Ockham's Razor and Oppy's ontological simplicity); it is *also* a matter of (i) the fewest *kinds* of entities posited (i.e. the qualitative simplicity component of Ockham's Razor and Oppy's ontological simplicity), (ii) fewer undefined primitive expressions (i.e. Oppy's ideological simplicity), and (iii) fewer and less complicated fundamental principles (i.e. Oppy's theoretical simplicity).

And here's the rub: it is not at all clear that classical theism wins out on simplicity *considering (i)–(iii)* (in addition to what Gel *does* consider – namely, only the quantitative simplicity element of Ockham's Razor). If anything, Oppy's naturalism seems to win out.

Let's proceed, then, through each aspect of simplicity. For each aspect, I will examine both (a) the simplicity of the respective theories' postulates about the first cause (the number thereof, the nature thereof, etc.) and (b) the *overall* simplicity of the respective theories. I examine (a) because Gel himself seems to focus primarily thereon.

(Gel, after all, is here comparing the simplicity of the theories' *answers* to the question in (1), which is only about what the theories say concerning the first cause.) But it's crucial to consider (b). For even if one theory has a theoretically simpler view of the first cause, it may only secure this at the cost of a more complex *overall* theory. Indeed, I find that (b) is what really matters; for if T is simpler than T* in (b)'s sense but more complex in (a)'s sense, we should clearly prefer T over T*. When we compare theories, we don't compare their simplicity *with respect to some small domain*; we compare their simplicity *full-stop*, and we settle on the overall simpler theory (assuming explanatory parity). Thus, I think far more weight should be placed on (b). But because Gel seems to focus on (a), I will examine it as well.

The quantitative simplicity element of Ockham's Razor

First, in terms of *how many* first causes are posited (a), the answer for both classical theism and Oppy's naturalism is *one*. For Oppy, the first cause is the initial singularity, and there is only one such thing. As Oppy writes in his debate with Kenny Pearce, 'Kenny says there is one initial thing: God. I say there is one initial thing, which I will call "the initial singularity"' (Pearce and Oppy (2022), 271).[9] Second, in terms of *overall* quantitative simplicity (b), Oppy's naturalism seems clearly superior to classical theism. For Oppy's entities are a *proper subset* of the classical theist's. The classical theist, no less than Oppy, thinks that the natural world exists. For Oppy, *that's all*. But for the classical theist, *that's not all*; there's also a *purely actual God*. Oppy's naturalism therefore seems to enjoy an edge in terms of the quantitative simplicity element of Ockham's Razor.

The qualitative simplicity element of Ockham's Razor

First, in terms of *how many kinds* of first cause are posited (a), it isn't clear how to assess classical theism and Oppy's naturalism. As explained above, both theories posit only *one* (causally and/or temporally) initial thing; we might conclude from this that they therefore each posit only *one kind* of initial thing. What makes this difficult is that one *thing* can be a member of multiple *kinds*. Oppy's initial singularity is a member of many kinds: natural things, necessary things, physical things, impersonal things, and so on. The classical theistic God, too, is a member of many kinds: supernatural things, necessary things, non-physical things, personal things, and so on.[10] Thus, in terms of the theories' answer to *how many kinds* of first cause there are, there is no clear winner. But there *is*, I think, a clear winner when it comes to *overall* qualitative simplicity (b). For classical theism introduces *whole hosts* of kinds into one's ontology in addition to those Oppy's naturalism admits. For Oppy, everything uniformly falls into the kinds *natural, physical, limited*, and so on. But classical theism *not only* recognizes such kinds *but also* postulates *additional* kinds: *supernatural, non-physical, unlimited*, and so on. Once again, because both Oppy and the classical theist are committed to the natural world (and all the kinds entailed therefrom) while the classical theist believes in God *in addition*, the kinds postulated by Oppy's naturalism are a *proper subset* of those of classical theism. Once more, then, Oppy's theory seems to enjoy an edge in terms of the quantitative simplicity element of Ockham's Razor.

Ideological simplicity

First, in terms of how many primitive undefined expressions are used to describe the first cause (a), there is once more no clear winner. To determine a winner, we would need a fleshed-out characterization of the initial state (from Oppy) and God (from the classical theist). We would then need to define as many of the terms as we can and, upon reaching

analytical bedrock, count the number of primitive undefined expressions contained in the respective characterizations. Obviously enough, this is a task that lies far beyond the scope of the present article, and it's not clear which theory would edge out. What, then, about *overall* ideological simplicity (b)? Here again, Oppy's naturalism seems to win out. For the classical theist, like the naturalist, is committed to the natural world and, with it, all the primitive undefined vocabulary needed to describe it.[11] But the classical theist needs *additional* primitive undefined vocabulary to describe God. This is especially true for *Thomistic* classical theism – something to which Gel frequently appeals. For such a view makes considerable use of *analogical expressions* to characterize God. As Oppy points out in Pearce and Oppy (2022, 117–119 and 272–274), such expressions are new, primitive, undefined expressions. In short, the primitive undefined expressions used in Oppy's naturalism are a *proper subset* of those used in classical theism. Oppy's naturalism once more edges out.

Theoretical simplicity

For the same reason as the previous paragraph, there doesn't seem to be a clear winner when we restrict our focus to the theories' principles concerning the first cause (a). But once more, Oppy's naturalism seems to edge out classical theism when it comes to *overall* theoretical simplicity. For Oppy, 'we should treat all claims [principles] as fundamental except those that have been explicitly shown to be logical consequences of other things to which we are committed' (*ibid.*, 268). Now consider what an ideal world-view would say about the natural universe. It would provide a complete specification of the initial state of the universe, the laws of nature governing its evolution over time, and the outcomes of every chance event. By Oppy's lights, 'logical consequence affords no possibilities to compress this information', and so on Oppy's account, 'we should suppose that it is all fundamental' (*ibid.*). But nothing about God's nature logically entails facts about the initial state of the universe, the laws of nature, or the outcomes of chance events. Classical theism, then – no less than naturalism – must take such specifications as fundamental. But such specifications are *all* Oppy's naturalism needs, since Oppy's naturalism commits *only* to the natural universe. The classical theist, however, commits *both* to the natural universe *and* to God, and hence the classical theist will accrue theoretical complexity costs deriving from additional specifications about God.

I do not claim that the above considerations are decisive or insuperable. By my lights, they at least cast *doubt* on Gel's appeal to simplicity. Having covered simplicity, let's now consider explanatory power.

Explaining the number of first causes

According to Gel, classical theism enjoys an explanatory advantage over Oppy's naturalism when it comes to explaining exactly how many first causes there are. For the classical theist, there is exactly one purely actual first cause 'because there can only be one purely actual thing', that is, 'because a purely actual thing is not susceptible of multiplication' (Gel (forthcoming), 3). My criticism is that the arguments Gel offers for the impossibility of multiple purely actual beings do not succeed, and hence that Gel has not succeeded in showing classical theism's explanatory advantage over Oppy's naturalism.

Gel's first argument for the (necessary) uniqueness of a purely actual thing runs as follows. A purely actual thing's

> essence would just be pure *esse* itself. But then, such a thing could not be multipliable, because it could not be subjected to any differentiating feature, as a genus (*animal*) is multiplied in its species (*human*) by the addition of a specific

difference (*rationality*) or a species (*human*) in its individuals (Peter, Mary, and James) by the addition of matter. There is nothing outside pure being that could act, with respect to it, as a differentiating feature, as the specific difference *rationality* is outside the genus *animal* or as matter is outside form, because 'outside' pure being there is only non-being, and non-being is nothing. So pure being could not be differentiated, *as pure being*, into multiple instances of itself, such as pure being A, pure being B, pure being C, and so on. Hence, a purely actual reality that was pure being itself – and such is the classical theist's picture of God – would have to be *unique*, out of metaphysical necessity. (*ibid.*)

The argument, in short, runs roughly as follows:

(1) For there to be more than one thing that is pure *esse*, there would have to be some feature(s) that differentiates each from the other(s).
(2) But nothing that is pure *esse* could have such a differentiating feature.
(3) So, there cannot be more than one thing that is pure *esse*. (1, 2)
(4) But whatever is purely actual is pure *esse*.
(5) So, there cannot be more than one purely actual thing. (3, 4)

We should note, first, that Gel offers no justification for premise (1). Gel simply *asserts* (albeit implicitly) that multipliability requires the possession of some differentiating feature. (Gel's claim that 'such a thing could not be multipliable, because it could not be subjected to any differentiating feature' is true *only if* multipliability requires some differentiating feature.)

We should also note, second, that premise (1) amounts to the deeply controversial *Identity of Indiscernibles* (IoI).[12]

$$\text{Identity of Indiscernibles (IoI): } \forall x \forall y (\forall F(Fx \leftrightarrow Fy) \rightarrow x = y)$$

IoI states that for any objects *x* and *y*, if for every feature *F* it is true that *x* is *F* iff *y* is *F*, then *x* is identical to *y*. In other words, if *x* and *y* share all and only the same features in common, then *x* is identical to *y*. Contraposing this, we get: if *x* is distinct from *y*, then there is some feature that one has that the other lacks. And this, in turn, is simply to say that multipliability requires some differentiating feature.

Given the controversial nature of IoI, it seems dialectically ill-suited simply to *assume* it. The principal motivation behind it seems to be *explicability*: if *x* and *y* share all and only the same features, *in virtue of what* are they distinct or individuated from one another? Given the nature of the case, we cannot pinpoint something had by one and *not* the other. And in that case, their individuation would seem to be primitive or brute.

It's not clear, though, whether we should be sanguine about this motivation. Why can't individuation or distinctness simply be primitive? In that case, there need not be some feature that grounds things' distinction. At the very least, we need some positive argument in favour of the principle, since the onus of justification in this context is on *Gel* to demonstrate necessary uniqueness. Indeed, there seems to be a *prima facie* plausible argument that individuation or distinctness *must* ultimately be primitive. For we can equally ask: in virtue of what are *those individuating features* of *x* and *y* individuated? If they're not individuated by anything, then we have primitive individuation, which is precisely what IoI sought to avoid. If they have some further differentiating features, then we're off on a vicious regress. For we can further ask, of *those* features, in virtue of what are *they* individuated? And so on *ad infinitum*.[13] It seems, then, that we must ultimately bottom out in primitive individuation.

What about premise (2)? Let's first consider Gel's proffered justification thereof: 'There is nothing outside pure being that could act, with respect to it, as a differentiating feature ... because "outside" pure being there is only non-being, and non-being is nothing' (*ibid.*). I'm not sure what to make of this, mainly because I don't understand what 'outside' means in this context. It certainly can't mean 'distinct from', since there most definitely *are* things distinct from pure being. But if it doesn't mean *distinction*, I struggle to see what it could mean.[14]

Second, there seem to be several plausible candidates, at least *in principle*, for features that differentiate among beings of pure *esse*. Consider, first, that most Thomistic classical theists think that being pure *esse* is compatible with being *Trinitarian* (i.e. existing as three persons). But if that's so, surely being pure *esse* is *also* compatible with being (say) *Unitarian* (i.e. existing as *one* person). It is not as though Jews and Muslims are prevented from affirming the traditional DDS (and, with it, God's being identical to his existence) by dint of their Unitarianism. It would also seem intolerably *ad hoc* and inexplicable if Trinitarianism *but not* Unitarianism (or Binitarianism, or etc.) was compatible with God's being pure *esse*. If all this is correct, then we have on our hands a clear candidate for a differentiating feature among purely actual beings of pure *esse*: the number of persons in which they exist. *In principle*, one being of pure *esse* could be Unitarian; another could be Binitarian; still another could be Trinitarian; and so on. I do not claim these are genuine metaphysical possibilities; my point is simply that the argument that there cannot *in principle* be something that differentiates beings of pure *esse* fails.

Consider, second, the distinction between being identical to one's *own* act of existence and being identical to existence *simpliciter* or existence *as such*. Thomistic metaphysics already admits that there are (roughly speaking) *different* acts of existence. My act of existence, for instance, is not the same as God's act of existence (with which God is identical). If they were the same, then I would be a composite of essence and ... God! God would be an internal principle that composes me as an essence-existence composite. This is clearly contrary to classical theism. As Kerr (2015) notes, the *esse commune* that creatures receive is 'somewhat lesser' (153) and 'somewhat other' (154) than the *esse tantum* of God.

God, then, is identical *not* to the existence of you or me or trees; he is identical to *his own* act of existence. But in that case, it's not clear why there cannot be two things which are identical to their acts of existence. They could presumably each be identical to their *own* respective acts of existence, which are different from one another. These acts of existence, moreover, could presumably be *primitively* distinct (which, as I argued in my discussion of IoI, seems possible).[15]

Finally, I would argue that Gel's argument is incompatible with Trinitarianism, for the exact same reasons for thinking there could only be one purely actual *being* of pure *esse* would equally motivate thinking that there could only be one purely actual *divine person* of pure *esse*.[16] Just mount the following parody argument:

(1) For there to be more than one divine person that is pure *esse*, there would have to be some feature that differentiates each from the other(s).
(2) But nothing that is pure *esse* could have such a differentiating feature.
(3) So, there cannot be more than one divine person that is pure *esse*. (1, 2)
(4) Anything divine is pure *esse*. (*Classical theism*)
(5) Any divine person is divine.
(6) So, any divine person is pure *esse*. (4, 5)
(7) So, there cannot be more than one divine person. (3, 6)

In summary, Gel's argument, if successful, would equally vindicate the following argument: for there to be more than one divine person, there would have to be some feature

that differentiates each from the others; but anything that is pure *esse* could not be subject to such a differentiating feature; hence, at least one such divine person would not be pure *esse*; but anything divine, per classical theism, is pure *esse*; hence, at least one such divine person would *not* be divine after all; and that's absurd. Hence, there cannot be more than one divine person.

Let's now consider Gel's second argument (or, at least, *variant* of the first argument) for uniqueness:

> If a purely actual thing has to be absolutely simple or noncomposite (and plausibly it has to, given that any composite is in potency with respect to its parts, or is a mixture of act and potency), then for there to be two absolutely simple beings, A and B, A would have to exhibit feature X that B lacked, in order for them to be differentiated. But then A would not be an absolutely simple being, because it would have parts, contrary to the hypothesis – A would be what B is *plus* feature X. So, once more, there could not be any feature that distinguished two hypothetical absolutely simple things, without making it the case that one of them or both were not, after all, absolutely simple. (Gel (forthcoming), 4)

It's not clear why any composite is 'in potency with respect to its parts', and Gel simply *asserts* as much without justification.[17] But set that aside. I think it's clear, now, that this second argument suffers from essentially the same problems as the first. It presupposes (without justification) IoI; IoI is deeply controversial, and moreover primitive individuation seems ultimately unavoidable; there are modes of differentiation entirely compatible with DDS; and the argument seems incompatible with Trinitarianism.

To draw out the last point, consider a parody argument:

> On classical theism, whatever is divine is purely actual. And divine persons are divine. Hence, on classical theism, divine persons are purely actual. But whatever is purely actual is absolutely simple or noncomposite. Hence, on classical theism, divine persons are absolutely simple or noncomposite. Now, for there to be two absolutely simple divine persons, A and B, A would have to exhibit feature X that B lacked, in order for them to be differentiated. But then A would not be an absolutely simple divine person, because it would have parts, contrary to the hypothesis – A would be what B is *plus* feature X. So, once more, there could not be any feature that distinguished two hypothetical absolutely simple divine persons, without making it the case that one of them or both were not, after all, absolutely simple. Hence, there can only in principle be one divine person.

The same principles and inferential steps are operative in each argument. I don't think one can accept the original argument, then, without also accepting the parody.

There is yet another problem with Gel's argument. In particular, it does *not* follow that A would be complex merely from the fact that it has a feature that B lacks. Perhaps A has (and is identical to) feature X, whereas B has (and is identical to) feature Y, where X is distinct from Y. In this case, it is simply *false*, *pace* Gel, that A would be 'what B is *plus* feature X'. In the case at hand, A is *not* a composite of everything B has plus feature X; A is *simply feature X*. And B is *simply feature Y*. And *X is not Y*. None of this requires A to have everything B has *with X superadded*. A is X, pure and simple. B is Y, pure and simple. And X is not Y; X and Y are primitively distinct pure *esses*. Thus, not only does Gel's second argument inherit the problems of the first, but it also faces a unique problem of its own.

According to Gel, what follows from his arguments is that 'Pure-act theism . . . provides us with an explanation of why there has to be that number [of first causes] instead of any

other – namely, because there could in principle be no more than one purely actual thing, so it is a necessary feature of a purely actual thing that it be *unique*' (*ibid.*). I have argued, however, that Gel's arguments establish no such thing. For all Gel has said, classical theism does *not* explain why there is exactly one first cause.

Gel's second argumentative path: foundational layer

Let's now consider Gel's second argumentative path from a necessarily existent foundational layer of reality. Gel begins by supposing that there is a necessary foundational or fundamental layer of reality that explains (perhaps by sustaining causation, perhaps by grounding, perhaps by constitution, etc.) non-foundational, non-fundamental things.[18] Gel then asks the same two questions as before: first, *how many* foundational entities are in this foundational layer, and second, *why* are there exactly that many?

The dialectic here then plays out much as before. Classical theism clearly answers the first question: *one*. And Gel relies on his arguments for uniqueness to establish that classical theism offers a satisfying explanation in response to the second question. I have already criticized Gel's arguments for uniqueness, however. As I argued, Gel has not shown classical theism's explanatory superiority on this front.

I do, however, want to address some distinctive things Gel says in his second argumentative path, beginning with the following: 'Classical theism, then, appears both simpler and more fruitful than Oppy's naturalism, since it can answer more questions about the First Cause with fewer principles (namely, with just one purely actual thing)' (Gel (forthcoming), 6). This, I think, is mistaken. Let's suppose classical theism answers more questions *about the first cause* with fewer principles. It clearly doesn't follow from this that classical theism is simpler than naturalism *tout court*.[19] We don't judge theories by how simple they are *only with respect to some small domain*; we judge them by their *overall* simplicity. And once we recognize this, I think it's plausible that Oppy's naturalism is simpler than classical theism. Once again, the classical theist (no less than the naturalist) is committed to the natural world, including whatever fundamental physical things there are (whether they be superstrings, quarks, mereological simples, quantum fields, the universal wavefunction, matter-energy, or whatever). For Oppy's naturalism, *that's all*. But for classical theism, *that's not all*. There is, in addition, a transcendent, purely actual, absolutely simple God. This brings with it new vocabulary, new principles, and new ontological commitments that the naturalist does without.

Finally, I want to address Gel's consideration of a naturalist who accepts a purely actual foundation. According to Gel, 'Both immutability and immateriality . . . seem unavoidable and straightforward once the pure actuality of the First Cause is embraced, since change is essentially the passage from potency to act and every material thing is both mutable and potential in many ways' (*ibid.*). Unfortunately, Gel simply *asserts* that everything material is changeable and potential in many ways. Perhaps Gel takes it to be self-evident. To me, however, it is by no means self-evident. Consider *atemporal wavefunction monism*. According to this view, there exists a fundamental, *physical*, non-spatiotemporal entity: the *universal wavefunction*. This is a perfectly respectable view that has seen a blossoming of interest in philosophy of physics.[20] If we understand 'material' and 'physical' to be synonymous, then it simply follows that there are perfectly respectable views on which there is a fundamental or foundational, unchangeable, timeless, *material thing*. We can also suppose that (a) the fundamental layer of reality is necessary (as Gel himself supposes in his second argumentative path) and (b) the fundamental layer of reality is cross-world invariant. From all of this it *simply follows* that the fundamental atemporal wavefunction has no potencies for change, cross-world variance, or non-existence. We therefore seem to have a perfectly respectable naturalist view on which the foundation of reality is a *material*, unchangeable,

purely actual thing. I don't claim that this view is *true*, of course; my point is simply that nothing Gel says rules it out. And yet Gel would *need* to rule it out in order to infer the *immateriality* of the purely actual foundation.

Non-classical routes to uniqueness

Gel concludes by considering two paths to uniqueness that don't require expressly classical theistic assumptions. Gel doesn't explicitly defend the first path, but I think it's worth addressing nonetheless. The first path comes from Hoffman and Rosenkrantz (2002), who ask us to consider two co-existent omnipotent beings named Dick and Jane. Hoffman and Rosenkrantz write:

> If this were possible, then it could happen that at some time, *t*, Dick, while retaining his omnipotence, attempts to move a feather, and at *t*, Jane, while retaining her omnipotence, attempts to keep that feather motionless. Intuitively, in this case, neither Dick nor Jane would affect the feather as to its motion or rest. Thus, in this case, at *t*, Dick would be powerless to move the feather, and at *t*, Jane would be powerless to keep the feather motionless! But it is absurd to suppose that an omnipotent agent could lack the power to move a feather or the power to keep it motionless. Therefore, neither Dick nor Jane is omnipotent. As a consequence, it is impossible that there be two coexistent omnipotent agents. (Hoffman and Rosenkrantz (2002), 168)

The argument here is something like:

(1) If two (or more) omnipotent beings could co-exist, then the following conjunction is possible: (i) one such omnipotent being attempts to bring it about that a contingent state of affairs *s* obtains at time *t*, and (ii) another such omnipotent being attempts to bring about another contingent state of affairs *s** at *t*, where *s**'s obtaining at *t* is incompatible with *s*'s obtaining at *t*.
(2) Necessarily, if (i) and (ii) are true, then one omnipotent being is powerless to bring *s* about at *t* while the other is powerless to bring *s** about at *t*.
(3) But it cannot be the case that an omnipotent being is powerless to bring *s* about at *t* or powerless to bring *s** about at *t*.
(4) So, two (or more) omnipotent beings cannot co-exist. (1–3)

The argument is valid, and both (2) and (3) seem plausible enough. Why, though, should we accept (1)? As far as I can see, it is simply a non-sequitur. Why would the possible joint satisfaction of (i) and (ii) follow from the *mere* possibility of two (or more) omnipotent beings? By my lights, (1) seems just as (im)plausible as (1*):

(1*) If one omnipotent being could exist, then the following conjunction is possible: (i) this omnipotent being attempts to bring it about that contingent state of affairs *s* obtains at time *t*, and (ii) this omnipotent being attempts to bring it about that contingent state of affairs *s** obtains at *t*, where *s**'s obtaining at *t* is incompatible with *s*'s obtaining at *t*.

Merely from the fact that there could be an omnipotent being, it doesn't follow that this omnipotent being could attempt to bring about two incompatible contingent states of affairs. Similarly, merely from the fact that there could be two (or more) omnipotent beings, it doesn't follow that they could both attempt to bring about jointly incompatible

contingent states of affairs. Perhaps Dick and Jane's wills are perfectly (and essentially) in harmony. Perhaps both Dick and Jane are essentially perfectly rational and essentially omniscient and so necessarily coordinate their actions in a consistent manner. Or perhaps their attempting to actualize incompatible states of affairs is impossible *not* because two co-existing omnipotent beings is impossible but *instead* for the following reason: while each *individually* has the power to actualize the contingent state of affairs in question, neither has the power to actualize it *while the other* attempts to actualize an incompatible state of affairs. For the actualization of that power would entail a contradiction, and any proper analysis of omnipotence debars the power to actualize contradictions.[21] Lots of entirely consistent hypotheses abound that would render (1)'s antecedent true and consequent false.

Gel's second path derives from 'God's unlimited or perfect nature' (Gel (forthcoming), 7). Gel writes:

> [I]t seems plausible that there can only be one absolutely or maximally perfect being, because for there to be two of them, they would need to be distinguished either by a perfection that one of them had and the other lacked or by having the same perfections to differing degrees. But in each case, either one of them or both would not be an absolutely or maximally perfect being, contrary to hypothesis. (*ibid.*, 7–8)

This argument, too, doesn't seem to work. It seems to rest, first, on IoI, and we've already seen why this is problematic. (Why can't there be two perfect beings, each with all the perfections to the maximal degree, that are simply primitively distinct?) It also seems to ignore ways that perfect beings might be differentiated. If – as Christians would have it – *being Trinitarian* is compatible with being perfect, surely *being Unitarian* is likewise compatible therewith. It's not as though Jews and Muslims, for instance, are prevented from affirming that God is perfect by dint of accepting Unitarianism. In that case, though, there could – at least in principle – be a feature differentiating perfect beings from one another – namely, the number of persons in which they exist. Finally, I think Gel's argument here is incompatible with Trinitarianism. Consider the following parody:

> Whatever is divine is absolutely or maximally perfect. And divine persons are divine. Hence, divine persons are absolutely or maximally perfect. But, plausibly, there can only be one absolutely or maximally perfect divine person, because for there to be two of them, they would need to be distinguished either by a perfection that one of them had and the other lacked or by having the same perfections to differing degrees. But in each case, either one of them or both would not be an absolutely or maximally perfect divine person, contrary to hypothesis.

As before, the same principles and inferential steps are operative in each argument. I don't think one can accept the original argument, then, without also accepting the parody.

Conclusion

Gel has argued that classical theism enjoys a significant advantage over Oppy's naturalism in terms of its simple and explanatorily illuminating answers to the questions of *how many* first causes there are and *why* there is exactly that number of first causes. The goal of my article has been to critically engage with this claim.

I began by characterizing classical theism and Oppy's naturalism. I then examined Gel's first argumentative path from causal finitism in favour of the abovementioned claim.

After covering some methodological preliminaries about simplicity, I argued *pace* Gel that Oppy's naturalism is importantly *simpler* than classical theism. I then argued against Gel's two arguments to the effect that classical theism explains exactly how many first causes there are. Along the way, I connected my findings to wider debates about the gap problem and the Christian doctrine of Trinitarianism.

I next examined Gel's second argumentative path from foundational necessity in favour of the above-mentioned claim. I argued that Gel's second path, like the first, doesn't succeed. After that, I considered two non-classical approaches to establishing God's uniqueness: one from omnipotence and another from perfection. I argued that both approaches fail.

While I have been critical of Gel's arguments, I think they are both innovative and thought-provoking. They advance debates about the gap problem, about the relative merits of classical and non-classical theisms, and about Oppy's naturalism. I hope my article similarly advances such debates into new territory.

Notes

1. Hughes (2018, 2), Bergmann and Brower (2006, 359–360), Dolezal (2017, 41–42), Duby (2016, 2), Mullins (2021), Schmid and Mullins (forthcoming), Schmid (forthcoming b).

2. A *positive ontological item* is anything that exists (has being or reality). As for *intrinsicality*, that's a matter of debate. Nothing in my article hangs on a precise and formalized account thereof, so I suggest that we make do with Lewis's classic (and reasonably intuitive) articulation: 'We distinguish intrinsic properties, which things have in virtue of the way they themselves are, from extrinsic properties, which they have in virtue of their relations or lack of relations to other things' (Lewis (1986), 61). See Marshall and Weatherson (2018) for more on the distinction.

3. This understanding of parts in connection with the traditional DDS is found in Spencer (2017, 123), Brower (2009, 105), Stump (2013, 33), Grant (2012, 254), Schmid and Mullins (forthcoming), Leftow (2015, 48), Sijuwade (forthcoming), among others.

4. See e.g. Oppy (2013) and (2018).

5. Note that Gel uses 'pure-act theism' (in addition to 'classical theism') to describe the model of God I articulated earlier.

6. For arguments for causal finitism, see Pruss (2018), Koons (2014; 2017), and Schmid (forthcoming a). For a response to the argument for causal finitism from the Grim Reaper Paradox (and Benardete paradoxes more generally), see Malpass (MS).

7. A *contingent* fact is one that obtains but could have failed to obtain. A *necessary* fact is one that obtains and could *not* have failed to obtain. The explanations in (ii) and (iv) must be *non-causal* because, as Gel rightly points out, we are here concerned with *first* (and hence *uncaused*) causes.

8. One might, of course, contest Oppy's account of simplicity (and, more generally, his account of theoretical virtue). But, first, Gel does not contest this; and, second, Gel is aiming (or seems to be aiming) to critique Oppy *using Oppy's own approach* to theory comparison.

9. Whether Oppy thinks multiple things *make up* the initial singularity, Oppy does not say. But it is important to note that Oppy himself thinks there is only one initial thing, as the quote reveals. I recognize, though, that this point may not go very far precisely because Oppy doesn't say whether multiple things *compose* the initial singularity. As an anonymous referee helpfully points out, in a sense all parties to the debate accept 'only one' first cause – even if one thinks that there are (say) *ten* causally initial entities, one might still speak of the *single* initial state they make up. The point of Gel's article, however, was to examine precisely the question of how many entities 'make up' the causally initial state. Thus, if Oppy does not (or else cannot) say how many entities make up the initial singularity, he clearly doesn't have an *explanation* of how many entities make up the initial singularity. (Explanation, after all, is plausibly factive.) So perhaps Gel *does*, after all, pinpoint an advantage of classical theism over naturalism *when it comes to* the (a) component of quantitative simplicity. (The jury, though, is still out on this; for Oppy has henceforth not explicitly said how many entities make up the first cause; but we

cannot infer from this that he has no position on the matter.) I stress, finally, that this concession only applies to the (a) component of quantitative simplicity. I have argued, though, that we should really be concerned solely with the (b) component of the various elements of simplicity.

10. I don't mean to imply that the classical theistic God is a member of many genera (in the technical Aristotelian sense thereof), or that God is less fundamental than the various kinds under which he falls. All I mean is that various kind terms can be truthfully predicated of God (if only analogously). And this is obviously true: *personal things* is a kind term, and God is personal (if only analogously so) under classical theism; *immaterial things* is a kind term, and God is immaterial under classical theism; and so on.

11. It is not plausible, after all, that the various expressions the naturalist needs to characterize natural reality can be *defined in terms of* expressions that classical theists use to describe God. (One reason for this is God's transcendence and status as *wholly other*. Another reason is the abundant use of analogical predication in (at least Thomistic) classical theism.)

12. 'IoI' is not to be confused with 'lol', which (I'm told) is an acronym the youths use for 'laughing out loud'.

13. One might object: it's not as though we are positing *two* features, F and F*, where x is F and y is F*, that individuate x from y; rather, we are simply saying that one has a feature that the other lacks. That is, we are simply saying that x is F, whereas y is *not* F. And there's nothing primitive or brute about the individuation of (or distinction between) *being F* and *not being F*. But this objection only *helps* my case. For suppose x is distinct from y. Then x is *not* y, and y is *not* x. But if there is nothing primitive or brute about the individuation of (or distinction between) *being F* and *not being F*, then there is similarly nothing primitive or brute about the individuation of (or distinction between) *being x* and *not being x*. And if there's nothing primitive or brute about this, then this is surely *all we need to say* in accounting for the distinction between x and y. No appeal need be made to individuating features. In short: to avoid a vicious regress of ever-more individuating features, the proponent of IoI must say that the individuation of (or distinction between) *being F* and *not being F* is either self-explained or primitive. But then this is precisely what the opponent of IoI can say about the first-order individuation of (or distinction between) *being x* and *not being x*.

14. Of course, this isn't an *objection* to Gel's proffered justification. I am simply noting what I take to be an unclarity in such justification that hinders proper analysis and evaluation thereof.

15. Note that the proposal here is *not* that each being shares an essence with the other *and also has*, in addition, its own respective act of existence. The proposal, instead, is that each individual (and each individual's essence) is identical to its own respective act of existence, and so *a fortiori* their essences are numerically distinct from one another.

16. IoI, after all, is *perfectly general*, applying to any x and y. Moreover, the principal motivation for IoI is equally general – if any x and y shared all and only the same features, then the fact that x is not identical to y would be inexplicable or groundless.

17. Perhaps the idea is that parts in some way 'actualize' their whole. But why should we think this? It's not clear, and Gel doesn't say.

18. Arguments for the existence of such a foundational layer abound. Non-classical-theist-friendly arguments are found in, e.g., Pruss and Rasmussen (2018) and Rasmussen (2019). Explicitly classical theistic arguments are found in Feser's (2017) Aristotelian, Neo-Platonic, Thomistic, and Rationalist proofs and Kerr's (2015) *De Ente* argument. For criticisms of Feser's Aristotelian proof, see Schmid (2021a, 2021c), and Oppy (2021). For criticisms of Feser's Neo-Platonic proof, see Schmid (2021b). And for extensive criticisms of all five of Feser's proofs and the *De Ente* argument, see Schmid and Linford (forthcoming).

19. An anonymous referee makes a nice point at this juncture: it's not clear that Gel is saying here that classical theism is simpler than naturalism *tout court*. We could instead interpret Gel – perhaps more charitably – as saying that classical theism is simpler than naturalism *as a theory of the first cause*. If this is how we should interpret Gel, then I would respond as I did earlier in the article – namely, (i) we should instead be focusing on the theories' *overall* simplicity, and (ii) naturalism is *overall* simpler than classical theism. I leave open which interpretation of Gel we should prefer, and so I leave the main text paragraph as is. Just keep this note in mind as you read it.

20. See (among others) Albert (2019, 2015, 2013), Ney (2021, 2020, 2013), North (2013), Barbour (1999), and Carroll and Singh (2019). Note that wavefunction monists differ in how they understand the universal wavefunction and the relationship between the universal wavefunction and all other physical objects. David Albert, Barry Loewer, Alyssa Ney, and Jill North, for instance, view the universal wavefunction as a field defined either on configuration space or on some more exotic state space. We need not get into the details here, however. What I say in the main text suffices for the point at hand.

21. It's similar to how an omnipotent being *does* have the power to causally determine a creature to do such-and-such but does *not* have the power to causally determine a creature to do such-and-such *while the creature is libertarianly free*.

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