

SIMPLY UNSUCCESSFUL: THE NEO-PLATONIC PROOF OF GOD'S EXISTENCE

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Abstract. Edward Feser defends the 'Neo-Platonic proof' for the existence of the God of classical theism. After articulating the argument and a number of preliminaries, I first argue that premise three of Feser's argument — the causal principle that every composite object requires a sustaining efficient cause to combine its parts — is both unjustified and dialectically ill-situated. I then argue that the Neo-Platonic proof fails to deliver the mindedness of the absolutely simple being and instead militates against its mindedness. Finally, I uncover two tensions between Trinitarianism and the Neo-Platonic proof.

I. INTRODUCTION

Edward Feser has recently defended five arguments for the existence of the God of (Thomistic) classical theism, each of which is divided into two stages. Stage one concludes to a being which, in stage two, is argued to have an appropriate range of classical divine attributes.

Feser's second argument — the Neo-Platonic proof — reasons from composite beings to the existence of an absolutely simple being. The general line of argument traces back to the fifth of Plotinus's *Enneads*, but it also enjoys a family resemblance with other contemporary arguments.¹ The primary focus of this paper is stage one of this argument. Formally, it proceeds:

1 For an exposition of Plotinus's own argument, see the first chapter of Lloyd P. Gerson, *Plotinus* (Routledge, 1994). Feser's Neo-Platonic proof — while situated within a broadly Neo-Platonic line of thought — is Feser's *own* refined and updated argument. For an exposition and defense of distinct but somewhat related arguments along Neo-Platonic lines, see William F. Vallicella, "From Facts to God: An Onto-Cosmological Argument", *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 48 (2000) and William F. Vallicella, *A Paradigm Theory of Existence: Onto-Theology Vindicated* (Kluwer Academic, 2002).

1. The things of our experience are composite.
2. A composite exists at any moment only insofar as its parts are combined at that moment.
3. This composition of parts requires a concurrent cause.
4. So, any composite has a cause of its existence at any moment at which it exists.
5. So, each of the things of our experience has a cause at any moment at which it exists.
6. If the cause of a composite thing's existence at any moment is itself composite, then it will in turn require a cause of its own existence at that moment.
7. The regress of causes this entails is hierarchical in nature, and such a regress must have a first member.
8. Only something absolutely simple or noncomposite could be the first member of such a series.
9. So, the existence of each of the things of our experience presupposes an absolutely simple or noncomposite cause.²

In simpler terms, whatever has parts requires a concurrent, sustaining efficient cause; chains of concurrent, sustaining efficient causation — because they are ordered hierarchically (or *per se*³) — cannot descend infinitely; hence, there exists an utterly non-composite first cause of the existence of composite things.⁴

2 Edward Feser, *Five Proofs of the Existence of God* (InterVarsity Press, 2017), 80.

3 Hierarchical or *per se* causal chains are concurrent chains of dependence wherein the relevant causal power is possessed in a wholly derivative and instrumental manner by the secondary or non-fundamental members. This contrasts with a linear or *per accidens* causal chain wherein the members possess the relevant causal power *of themselves* and hence do not derive it as instruments.

4 As I use it throughout this article, 'cause' always refers to 'efficient cause'. I do not treat efficient causes as definitionally *physical* (involving (say) some transmission of a physical quantity or quality, or involving (say) some kind of energy transfer). Instead, I employ a very minimal understanding of efficient causation as the *production* or *bringing about* of some effect. In the context of the Neo-Platonic proof, the (purported) effect in question is the *existence* of composite objects (and the composition, unity, or combination of their parts).

My aim in this paper is to critically appraise this Neo-Platonic argument. I first discuss some necessary preliminaries in §2. Next, I argue in §3 that the argument fails to establish the God of classical theism insofar as premise (3) is appropriately regarded as unmotivated by detractors of classical theism. I also address Feser's inference to the *mindedness* of the absolutely simple being. Finally, I argue in §4 that the argument is inimical to Trinitarianism on two fronts. While the criticisms leveled in §4 do not constitute direct challenges to the Neo-Platonic proof, they are significant insofar as they establish (if successful) tension between the Neo-Platonic proof and a core tenet of Christianity.

Before turning to the preliminaries, it's worth dwelling briefly on the significance and situatedness of this paper. There exists (as yet) no scholarly evaluation of Feser's Neo-Platonic proof in the literature.⁵ This dearth is surprising given the importance to classical theism of reasoning from composite being to non-composite being.

II. PRELIMINARIES

Before tackling my criticisms of the Neo-Platonic proof, clarity on several background concepts is necessary.

The first of these is *classical theism*. Classical theism — along with affirming God's essential moral perfection, omniscience, omnipotence, intelligence, and so on — is committed to four core and distinctive theses: simplicity, immutability, timelessness, and impassibility.⁶ My investigation focuses especially on the Doctrine of Divine Simplicity (DDS). According to DDS, God is

5 The only (non-review) critical scholarly appraisals of any of Feser's five proofs are Graham Oppy, "On Stage One of Feser's 'Aristotelian proof'", *Religious Studies* (Forthcoming), Joseph C. Schmid, "Existential inertia and the Aristotelian proof", *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 89 (Forthcoming), and Joseph C. Schmid, "Stage One of the Aristotelian Proof: A Critical Appraisal", *Sophia* (Forthcoming). However, these authors focus almost exclusively on Feser's Aristotelian proof.

6 R. T. Mullins, "Classical Theism", in *The T&T Clark Handbook of Analytic Theology*, eds. James M. Arcadi and James T. Turner (T&T Clark, 2021) and Thomas Williams, "Introduction to Classical Theism", in *Models of God and Alternative Ultimate Realities*, eds. Jeanine Diller and Asa Kasher (Springer, 2013).

utterly devoid of physical, metaphysical, and logical parts; God is identical to his essence, existence, attributes, action, power, and so on.⁷

This brings us to the second concept central to this investigation: *parthood*. Within the classical theistic tradition, each of the following — when distinct in a being — are typically understood as component parts: form and matter, essence and existence, subject and accidents, individual and its essence, individual and its properties, act and potency, genus and specific difference, and agent and the agent's actions.⁸

These examples of multiplicity that entail composition are helpful, but it's not clear that they facilitate a precise definition of parthood as understood within classical theism. Fakhri usefully characterizes DDS as the thesis that anything intrinsic to God is identical to God.⁹ Fakhri points out that this is a straightforward entailment of absolute divine simplicity. More generally, then, we can follow the classical theistic tradition in understanding a *part* of S as some positive ontological item *intrinsic* to S but *distinct* from S.¹⁰

This understanding of parts is in marked agreement with how DDS is traditionally articulated. Augustine famously put it in *The City of God* that God *is* what he *has*. And as Vallicella articulates it, “God is ontologically simple... there is nothing intrinsic to God that is distinct from God.”¹¹

There are also straightforward paths from classical theism to this understanding of parthood. As Katherin Rogers points out, for classical theism

7 Michael Bergmann and Jeffrey E. Brower, “2006. ‘A Theistic Argument Against Platonism (and in Support of Truthmakers and Divine Simplicity)’”, in *Oxford Studies in Metaphysics* (Vol. 2), ed. Dean W. Zimmerman (Oxford Univ. Press, 2006), 359–360, Katherin A. Rogers, “The Traditional Doctrine of Divine Simplicity”, *Religious Studies* 32, no. 2 (1996), 166, and Gaven Kerr, *Aquinas and the Metaphysics of Creation* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2019), 54.

8 Mullins, “Classical Theism”. See also the references in the previous footnote.

9 Omar Fakhri, “Another Look at the Modal Collapse Argument”, *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 13, no. 1 (2021).

10 Intrinsicity is tricky. A rough sketch: intrinsic features or predications characterize things “in virtue of the way they themselves are”, whereas extrinsic features or predications characterize things “in virtue of their relations” or lack thereof to other things (David K. Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds* (Blackwell, 1986), 61). Intrinsic predications of S, then, are true solely in virtue of how S is *in itself*. Extrinsic predications of S are true in virtue of something outside S to which S relationally stands or fails to stand. Finally, a positive ontological item is anything with existence (being, reality), i.e., anything of which it is true to say ‘it is in reality’ or ‘it exists’. Thus, x is a positive ontological item just in case there is such a thing as x.

11 William F. Vallicella, “Divine Simplicity”, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2019).

“whatever is not God is created by Him.”¹² If there were something distinct from God (i.e., something that is not God) intrinsic to God, then there would thus be some portion of creation within God. This is flatly incompatible with classical theism. (One reason for this is that creation is contingent, and thus if some portion of creation were within God, there would be some contingency within God. This is incompatible with classical theism’s commitment to the absence of intrinsic, non-essential features or accidents in God.)

The final concept crucial to this investigation is that of *neo-classical theism*.¹³ Also known as modified classical theism, neo-classical theism affirms much of classical theism: God is essentially morally perfect, creates and sustains the world *ex nihilo*, exists of metaphysical necessity, and so on. But unlike classical theism, it rejects and/or modifies one or more of simplicity, immutability, timelessness, and impassibility. For our purposes, we will focus on neo-classical theism’s denial of DDS. This version of neo-classical theism holds that God has parts in the sense of items intrinsic to but distinct from God: multiple divine attributes (like omniscience, omnipotence, etc.), potential for accidental change, and so on. For neo-classical theists, moreover, this multiplicity is not just on the part of our *predications* of God (e.g., various predications of ‘omniscience’, ‘omnipotence’, and so on); the multiplicity is also on the side of God himself, such that God — in extramental, extralinguistic reality — genuinely has some positive ontological item(s) intrinsic to but distinct from himself.

With the necessary preliminaries covered, we can turn to my first set of criticisms of the Neo-Platonic proof.

III. PREMISE THREE

Premise three embodies what I will call the Neo-Platonic Causal Principle as applied to composite objects (i.e., concrete objects with parts):

Neo-Platonic Causal Principle (NPCP): Any composite object requires a sustaining efficient cause of its existence — that is, a cause that concurrently

12 Rogers, “The Traditional Doctrine”, 167.

13 For characterizations of neo-classical theism, see Kevin Timpe, “Introduction to Neo-Classical Theism”, in *Models of God and Alternative Ultimate Realities*, eds. Jeanine Diller and Asa Kasher (Springer, 2013) and R. T. Mullins, “The Difficulty of Demarcating Panentheism”, *Sophia* 55 (2016), 331–332.

combines the parts together to constitute the object at any moment at which it exists.¹⁴

Why should we believe NPCP?

The central motivation seems to be a kind of *explicability* requirement — that is, a requirement that the combination of parts (at any given moment of a composite object’s existence) be *explained*. Feser proceeds through candidate explanations (the whole itself, say, or one or more of its parts) and finds them all wanting. Rejecting appeal to inexplicability or brute facts, the only remaining explanation (according to Feser) would be some extrinsic cause or principle that accounts for the unity of parts.

In order to evaluate this central motivation, let’s proceed through Feser’s reasons for ruling out various alternative explanations of the unity (at any given moment) of a composite object. For ease of exposition, I’ve broken down Feser’s reasoning into a series of *four steps*. Let’s consider these steps in turn.

Step one is that all composites depend on their parts. Feser writes that “a composite is less fundamental than its parts in the sense that its existence presupposes that its parts exist and are put together in the right way.”¹⁵ Moreover, argues Feser, “a composite depends on its parts not merely (and indeed not necessarily always) in a temporal sense, but more fundamentally (and always) in an atemporal sense.”¹⁶ At any given moment of a composite object’s life, the object’s “existence will presuppose that its parts exist and are put together in the right way at that moment.”¹⁷

One worry thus far is that the mere fact that a given composite object *presupposes* the existence and combination of its parts does not entail that it *depends* (in some metaphysical or explanatory sense) on those parts. It only

14 Two notes are in order. First: roughly, *x* is a *sustaining* cause of *y*’s existence provided that (i) *y*’s existence causally depends on *x*’s causal activity at any moment at which *y* exists, and (ii) *x*’s moment-by-moment causal activity is a *necessary condition* for *y*’s moment-by-moment existence. Second: while Gerson (cf. Gerson, *Plotinus*, 26) says the One acts as an efficient cause, Perl denies that the One is any kind of cause (cf. Eric D. Perl, “‘The Power of All Things’: The One as Pure Giving in Plotinus”, *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 71, no. 3 (1997), 306–307). I am therefore focusing more on Plotinian Neo-Platonism as interpreted by Gerson rather than Perl. Moreover, the mereology I employ comes from Feser and others in the classical theistic tradition (cf. §2) rather than Neo-Platonists.

15 Feser, *Five Proofs*, 70.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

entails that the existence and combination of the parts is simply a *necessary condition* for the existence of the whole. But this only implies a kind of logical or counterfactual dependence, not an *explanatory* or *metaphysical* dependence.¹⁸

One way to see that logical dependence neither means nor entails explanatory dependence is to consider that logical dependence can be *symmetric*, whereas explanatory dependence is necessarily *asymmetric*. On certain plausible views in the philosophy of mathematics, in any world in which Socrates exists, Socrates's singleton set exists. Socrates therefore cannot exist without his singleton set existing. But it is likewise the case (again, under plausible views in the philosophy of mathematics) that singleton sets exist only in worlds wherein their members exist. It would follow that Socrates's singleton set cannot exist without Socrates existing.¹⁹ Hence, there's logical dependence in both directions. But it's also clear that the set is in some sense a *derivative* entity — it depends on the more fundamental reality of Socrates himself.

Indeed, even in the case of the radically independent God of classical theism, there seem to be a whole host of necessary conditions or presuppositions for his existence. For instance, God's existing and being the way he is presupposes the laws of identity and non-contradiction. And despite presupposing these as necessary conditions, God is still not dependent on another for his existence.

Thus, logical dependence can be symmetric. But could explanatory dependence be symmetric? I don't think so. A circle of causal or explanatory dependence for existence seems metaphysically impossible. For if *x* causes or explains the existence of *y*, and *y* causes or explains the existence of *x*, then *x* is both *prior* to *y* (on account of *x*'s causing/explaining *y*'s existence) and *posterior* to *y* (on account of *y*'s causing/explaining *x*'s existence). And that seems absurd.

But perhaps Feser's thought is one about *fundamentality* or *grounding*: wholes are dependent on their parts insofar as parts are more fundamental

18 X logically or counterfactually depends on Y just in case had Y not existed, X would not have existed. Explanatory or metaphysical dependence has much more metaphysical 'oomph' (as it were) and conveys a causal or non-causal (e.g., grounding, realizing) relation between X and Y. In such cases, X's existence and/or character is explained or accounted for in terms of Y's existence, character, and/or activity.

19 The example of Socrates and his singleton set is from Matthew Baddorf, "Divine Simplicity, Aseity, and Sovereignty", *Sophia* 56 (2016), 410.

than and/or ground the existence of their wholes. But while this might be true in some cases, it's not clear that *all* cases of part-whole relationships fit this schema (especially given the broad classical theistic understanding of parts). It seems eminently plausible, for instance, that some wholes ground (the existence and/or character of) their parts. As Baddorf writes:

[I]t is far from obvious that the only kind of thing that could satisfactorily explain compresence is an outside sufficient cause. ... [The neo-classical theistic] God's tropes are dependent upon God. This suggests another explanation for their compresence: they are compresent because they are each grounded in God. This is not a causal explanation, but it is plausible to think that it is an explanation nonetheless. ... This conclusion can also be supported by more general argument. It is plausible that tropes are individuated by their bearers and so cannot exist without them. Or, similarly, it is plausible to think that tropes cannot exist without their bearers since they are merely ways their bearers are.²⁰

While Baddorf focuses solely on the distinction between God and his property instances, his central point is simply that it seems eminently plausible that some wholes (e.g., the neo-classical God) ground their parts.

What's more, whole-to-part explanation or grounding is a very (broadly) Aristotelian notion. Aristotelianism (broadly construed) conceives parts of substances as in some sense less fundamental than the substances they compose, since their identities are intelligible only in light of the substances to which they belong. (For instance, something's being *my heart* seems to presuppose *my existence* as a whole, integrated substance.)

Naturally, debates concerning divine aseity overlap quite heavily with the considerations adduced above. According to divine aseity, God is "an absolutely independent being — a being that does not depend on anything else for its existence."²¹ One of the principal motivations for DDS derives from aseity. If there were some item intrinsic to but distinct from God — that is, if God had some part — then God would be dependent on something that is distinct from God. As Aquinas writes, "every composite is posterior to its component parts, and is dependent on them; but God is the first being."²² One influential

20 Baddorf, "Divine Simplicity", 408–409.

21 Gregory Fowler, "Simplicity or Priority?", in *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion* (Vol. 6), ed. Jonathan L. Kvanvig (Oxford Univ. Press, 2015), 115.

22 Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologiae of St. Thomas Aquinas* (2nd and Revised Edition) (Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1920), I, q3 a7.

response to this line of reasoning derives from what Fowler calls the *Doctrine of Divine Priority (DDP)*: “For all x , if x is a proper part of God or x is a property of God, then x depends on God for its existence.”²³ And since dependence is asymmetric, God does not depend on God’s parts. Like Baddorf, then, Fowler offers whole-to-part grounding as a viable model for understanding divine aseity and the independence of at least one whole (viz. God).

But let’s not miss the forest for the trees. What matters for present purposes is that nothing in Feser’s Neo-Platonic proof—and, moreover, nothing Feser says on behalf of its premises—gives any reason for thinking that whole-to-part explanations of the kind considered above are impossible (or else insufficient to explain the compresence of an object’s parts).²⁴ More precisely, the live possibility (and, I would argue, plausibility) of whole-to-part grounding renders Feser’s step one far from demonstrated. It is not at all clear that any whole whatsoever (explanatorily or metaphysically) depends on its parts, and there are plausible views in mereology and metaphysics according to which this step comes out false. Nothing in Feser’s step justifies a denial of these mereological and metaphysical positions.

Let’s turn, then, to *step two*: wholes cannot cause the combination of their parts. Feser writes the following in connection to a chair (the whole) and its parts:

How do the parts of a composite come together to form the whole? It can’t be the composite itself that causes this to happen. ... [A]t any particular moment, the existence of the whole depends on the existence and proper arrangement of the parts. And the chair as a whole can’t be the cause of those parts existing, and being assembled in just the right way, at that moment. We would in that case have an explanatory vicious circle, insofar as the existence of the whole would depend on the existence and arrangement of

23 Fowler, “Simplicity”, 122.

24 An anonymous referee helpfully pointed out, at this juncture, that the traditional Platonic (and, in some cases, Neo-Platonic) application of aseity differs importantly from the Christian and classical theistic application thereof. The latter draws the boundary between the *uncreated* (i.e., God alone) and *created* (i.e., everything apart from God). The created encompasses *both* the intelligible and sensible, in contradistinction to certain traditional Platonic (and, in some cases, Neo-Platonic) thought. For a nice exposition of this point (and related points), see Michael Brugarolas, “Divine Simplicity and Creation of Man: Gregory of Nyssa on the Distinction Between the Uncreated and the Created”, *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 91, no. 1 (2017). Thanks to an anonymous referee for these points.

the parts, and the existence and arrangement of the parts would depend on the existence of the whole.²⁵

The problem with this step, though, is that even granting that wholes cannot *efficiently cause* the existence of their parts, this by no means entails that wholes cannot *explain* their parts. We've already seen defensible views according to which wholes can non-causally explain (i.e., ground) their parts. And because vicious explanatory circularity is impossible, it follows that in cases of whole-to-part grounding, the parts do not explain the existence of the whole.

Step three of Feser's case for NPCP is that it's clear that there are extrinsic causal factors that sustain composite objects in existence:

[T]he existence and arrangement of the chair's parts at any moment does not depend on the chair itself, but on myriad other factors. ... The legs and screws themselves exist at that moment because their respective molecules exist and are combined in certain specific ways... Then there are other factors, such as the temperature in the room in which the chair sits being within the right range. ... At any moment at which they exist, their parts exist and are arranged in just the right way, and that is the case only because various other factors exist and are combined in just the right way at that moment. *Composite things have causes...*²⁶

There are several problems with this step. First, even if it's true that *macroscopic physical objects* clearly have such causes (in virtue of their situatedness within a physical context wherein a host of purportedly external conditions must be in place), it by no means follows from this that *any composite object whatsoever* requires an efficient sustaining cause.

Consider, for instance, the God of neo-classical theism. According to the classical theistic understanding of parts, the neo-classical God is a composite object. But it is not at all clear that there must be a sustaining efficient cause of his existence. (Indeed, it's not at all clear how there *could* be). He is not situated within a physical context; he does not require a host of conditions to be in place in order to exist (like temperature, pressure, etc.); he is a necessary being; and he causes the existence of every concrete object apart from himself. Under such an understanding, it is simply *metaphysically impossible* for there to be a pre-existing context of concrete objects that causally sustain the neo-classical God's existence, since there being such a context *already pre-*

25 Feser, *Five Proofs*, 70–71.

26 *Ibid.*, 71.

supposes the neo-classical God's free creative activity. Nothing Feser says in any of the steps justifies a demand for a sustaining cause of the neo-classical God's existence.²⁷

Or consider a naturalistic view according to which there exist ultimate, fundamental constituents of physical reality (whether they be particles (like quarks), one or more quantum fields, superstrings, the universal wavefunction, or whatever). Now, while these may be *physically* non-composite — quarks and superstrings, for instance, are not (or would not be) built up or constructed out of physical parts — they are nevertheless *metaphysically* composite under the classical theistic understanding of parthood articulated in §2. What matters for present purposes is that no reason is given as to why *these* (metaphysically) composite objects are likewise situated within a physical context wherein a host of external sustaining causes must operate in harmony in order for such objects to exist. It's not at all clear why or how temperature, pressure, and the other factors cited are even relevant to the ground layer of physical reality. After all, such a ground layer is precisely that which ultimately accounts for how such physical contexts could even arise in the first place — and so it would be absurd for there to be a more fundamental, pre-existent physical context that sustains *them* in being.

Now, one might at this juncture raise worries for this last example. Here are two worries one might level. First, one might question whether there even *is* such a fundamental, ultimate ground layer of physical reality. That's a good question, but it doesn't adequately consider the dialectical context at hand. Feser is aiming to give a *positive demonstration* of NPCP. One of the approaches he takes to justifying this is *step three* (as I've outlined it), which appeals to (purportedly) clear cases of composite objects' being sustained in being by a pre-existent physical context. But as I argued in the previous paragraph, one clear way to circumvent this justification is to hold that there *is* such a fundamental, ground layer to physical reality that provides a context

27 Note that the onus is *not* on the *detractor* of Feser's argument to *positively justify* neo-classical theism. Rather, they need only point out that nothing Feser says on behalf of his argument gives the neo-classical theist sufficient reason to *abandon* their position. Note also that recourse cannot be made to Feser's Aristotelian or Thomistic proof at this stage in order to argue that the neo-classical theistic God would require a sustaining cause — *unless*, of course, one wants to render the Neo-Platonic proof parasitic on such proofs for its success, thereby granting that the argument fails as a standalone argument. But then one has granted the thesis of my article.

for less fundamental physical realities but does not itself have some more fundamental physical context. Given that this circumvents step three, it follows that the success of step three as a justification for (or part of a justification for) NPCP *presupposes* that there couldn't be such a fundamental, ground layer as I've described it. The onus of justification is therefore on *Feser* to justify why there couldn't be such a layer. Without such justification, step three rests on an unjustified assumption.

A second worry one might raise is that while there may not be a physical sustaining cause for this ground layer of physical reality, there must nevertheless be a *non-physical* cause sustaining it in being. But once again, this misses the dialectical context at hand. For even if it's true that a non-physical sustaining cause is required, nothing in step three justifies this. Step three simply adduces a broader physical context in which non-fundamental physical objects are situated. But no reason (thus far) has been given as to why there must exist a non-physical sustaining cause of this fundamental layer of physical reality. This bridges nicely into *step four*, one wherein *Feser* aims to do precisely that.

In the fourth and final step, *Feser* extends his arguments concerning physical composition to *metaphysical* composition:

The point is just that what has been said here about ordinary physical parts like chair legs and screws would be true also of metaphysical parts like form and matter, if they exist. ... For on the Aristotelian analysis, the form of something like copper or a tree is, all by itself and apart from matter, a mere abstraction rather than a concrete object. ... But matter all by itself and apart from any form is, for the Aristotelian, nothing but the *potential* to be something. It is only *actually* some thing if it has the form of some particular kind of thing. So, though form and matter are different, there is a sense in which form depends on matter and matter depends on form. We would thus have an explanatory vicious circle if there were not something outside them which accounted for their combination.²⁸

Feser then goes on to apply the same reasoning to other (purported) forms of metaphysical composition, like essence-existence composition. There are, however, several problems with this fourth step. First, it's quite dialectically

28 Ibid., 73.

limited insofar as it rests on contentious commitments to various kinds of metaphysical parts.²⁹

Second, even granting such commitments, surely vicious explanatory circles are metaphysically impossible *regardless* of whether there's an extrinsic cause accounting for the viciously intertwined things. As we saw earlier, vicious explanatory circularity implies that *x* causes or grounds or explains *y* while *y* causes or grounds or explains *x*. This is impossible regardless of whether there is some *z* that accounts for both *x* and *y*, since the very fact of the vicious circularity entails that *x* is both prior and posterior (i.e., not prior) to *y*, which is absurd. If hylemorphism entails that two distinct things are viciously intertwined — such that the existence of each explains the existence of the other — then that would simply be a *reductio* of hylomorphism. Far from demonstrating the need for an extrinsic sustaining cause of any composite object, Feser's step four seems to impute a metaphysical impossibility to composite (material) objects *from the get-go*.³⁰

Third, this hylemorphic argument, even if successful, would only show that *material* objects require something apart from them to explain them. It entails nothing about (say) the neo-classical God. And so it fails to justify NPCP as applied to *non-material* composite things.³¹

Fourth, there seem to be perfectly legitimate explanations of the combination of parts that *avoid* vicious circularity but that *don't* adduce extrinsic sustaining efficient causes. For instance, there is the whole-to-part grounding

29 In particular, it requires a contentious commitment to a constituent ontology as opposed to (say) a relational ontology or even anti-realism with respect to metaphysical parts like properties. For criticisms of constituent ontology, see van Inwagen, *Existence: Essays in Ontology* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2014), ch. 10 and Eric T. Olson, "Properties as Parts of Ordinary Objects", in *Being, Freedom, and Method: Themes from the Philosophy of Peter van Inwagen*, ed. John A. Keller (Oxford Univ. Press, 2017). And for defense of the aforementioned anti-realism (at least with respect to metaphysical parts like properties), see William Lane Craig, *God and Abstract Objects: The Coherence of Theism: Aseity* (Springer, 2017).

30 And if Feser holds instead that *x* only causes or explains *y* in some respect distinct from the respect in which *y* causes or explains *x* (in order to avoid absurdity), then his argument no longer has teeth. For then there is *no* vicious circularity, and hence the very means by which he motivated the need for an extrinsic source of *both x* and *y* is undercut.

31 I wouldn't grant, though, that the argument is successful. I argue that it fails for a variety of reasons in Schmid, "Existential inertia".

that I covered earlier.³² Another seemingly legitimate candidate explanation for the unity of an object's parts is that it is *metaphysically necessary* that they be so combined. If we take the ultimate reality (be it the neo-classical God or some ground layer of physical reality) to be a necessary being, the unity of its parts could easily be explained in terms of the metaphysical necessity of said unity. Now, I'm not claiming that metaphysical necessity categorically precludes any further explanation. Rather, I'm simply noting that metaphysical necessity may plausibly *itself* constitute a kind of explanation for something's obtaining. Even if the reader disagrees with this, the point is that nothing in Feser's Neo-Platonic proof gives those who *accept* (or are *neutral* on) the explanatory legitimacy (in principle) of metaphysical necessity any reason to abandon their position.³³

32 Of course, there is the question of why the whole object exists at all in the first place. Two notes. First, this is (or, at least, Feser has not justified why it *isn't*) distinct from the question of what accounts for the *unity* or *combination* of the object's parts. Second, perhaps the whole doesn't *need* an explanation, or perhaps it's explained in virtue of something *other* than a sustaining efficient cause. Consider again the neo-classical theistic God—a supreme, perfect being. Perhaps the neo-classical God (as a whole) is explained in terms of his perfection (cf. T. Ryan Byerly, "From a necessary being to a perfect being", *Analysis* 79, no. 1 (2019) for a similar idea), or in virtue of the metaphysical necessity of his existence, or in virtue of an Aristotelian (powers-based) modal metaphysics in conjunction with there being nothing with the causal power to destroy God or make it the case that God never existed (along the lines of Tien-Chun Lo, "The gap problem made easy?", *Analysis* 80, no. 3 (2020), *mutatis mutandis*), or in virtue of the *kind* of thing God is. Or perhaps the difference between the explained and unexplained is sheer, unlimited perfection—in which case the neo-classical God has no further explanation, but explains everything else (all limited, non-perfect beings). The main point is that every worldview will plausibly require something ultimate (i.e., something not explained in terms of anything else (including classical theism)). And Feser has given no reason as to why the ultimate/unexplained being couldn't be the neo-classical theistic God. Again, the onus of justification is on Feser to demonstrate that only an utterly non-composite being could be ultimate/unexplained.

33 Here's a way to appreciate why some philosophers think necessity can explain. Suppose the law of non-contradiction is true. Why? What explains that? Perhaps the explanation is that reality is consistent. But why is reality consistent? One of the only plausible answers that comes to mind is that 'it just *must* be that way!'. By my lights, playing the 'why?' game—that is, repeatedly asking why in a chain of explanations—will ultimately bottom out in 'well, things just *have* to be that way—end of story'. It should be noted, though, that my rejoinder to the Neo-Platonic proof does not rely on *showing* or *justifying* why necessity can explain. That would be a *rebutting* defeater. But I am offering an *undercutting* defeater. In other words, I am arguing that (i) nothing in Feser's Neo-Platonic proof *rules out* the legitimacy of this kind of explanation (in principle), and that (ii) ruling it out is *required* for the Neo-Platonic proof to succeed.

A third seemingly legitimate candidate explanation is that the *kind* of thing in question simply *requires* the obtaining of the explanandum. For instance, perhaps the neo-classical theistic God's essence simply *requires* existence, or perhaps unlimited perfection requires existence. And the legitimacy of this form of explanation seems eminently plausible. Consider the properties 'being triangular' and 'being trilateral' (which are, again, *parts* according to the classical theistic understanding of parthood). Why are these co-instantiated? Because they are simply the *kinds* of properties that *require* co-instantiation. This seems to be a perfectly legitimate explanation of their compresence or unity in something. It does seem odd to demand some sort of concurrent sustaining cause keeping the two properties together. And this plausibly generalizes to a being whose parts are all the *kinds* of things that *require* their unity and co-instantiation. (This is compounded even further if there is a kind of intrinsic intelligibility to the parts' unity together: it is no coincidence, for instance, that omnipotence, omniscience, and moral perfection are all compresent and unified together in the neo-classical theistic God.)

Here's a fourth seemingly legitimate candidate explanation. It seems that the neo-classical theist (if they're unwilling to adopt any of the above explanations) could be well within their rights in holding that the unity of God's parts flows from one simple component of God. Perhaps pure perfection is the root, the core, the fundamental aspect of God. From pure perfection flows the purely positive great-making properties like omniscience, omnipotence, essential moral goodness, and so on. Pure perfection is like a spring from which flow the individual perfections or great-making properties. In this case, we have one 'divine part' (in the broad, classical theistic sense) that explains the unity of God's parts: all the distinct properties and powers flow from or are explained by the simple property of sheer perfection. Once again, we have an explanation of the unity of the parts here, but nothing outside of or external to God is explaining or causing the unity.³⁴

34 And this kind of internal explanation of unity, moreover, is not restricted to neo-classical theists. R. D. Ingthorsson, *A Powerful Particulars View of Causation* (Routledge, 2021) ch. 6 develops an interactive view of causality informed by contemporary science and the metaphysics of causation. Ingthorsson's explanation of the unity and existence of composite objects is of particular relevance to the Neo-Platonic proof. He provides several reasons for thinking that the unity of composite material objects is explained internally in terms of the causal, glue-like interactions among parts. Thus, in contradistinction to NPCP's requirement of an extrinsic

Here's a fifth seemingly legitimate explanation of the combination of a (temporal) composite object O's parts at non-first moments of its existence. For O's parts to *fail* to be combined at moment m despite being combined from $[m^*, m)$, $m^* < m$, is for some *change* to occur.³⁵ But a change occurs only if some factor causally induces said change. Hence, if no factor causally induces a change, then the change won't occur. Thus, if no factor causally induces O's parts to fail to be combined at m despite being combined from $[m^*, m)$, then O's parts are combined at m . Once we add that nothing came along to causally induce this — that is, once we add that nothing came along to destroy O (or O's parts) or to separate O's parts from m^* to m — it simply follows that O's parts are combined at m . Here, we seem to have a perfectly respectable, perfectly legitimate explanation of the combination of O's parts at m , and this explanation adduces facts outside of or extrinsic to O at m .

There are *many* more legitimate explanations besides, but I shan't explore them for purposes of space. What matters here is that Feser's arguments for NPCP do *nothing* to address such alternative explanations. The central takeaway of this section, then, is as follows. The detractor of classical theism — whether it be a neo-classical theist or a non-theist — need not appeal to inexplicability or brute facts to account for unity. There are perfectly sensible explanations that don't adduce sustaining efficient causes. I conclude that Feser's third premise (i.e., NPCP) is not only unjustified but also dialectically

source or principle that causally sustains the unity, Ingthorsson cites *internal* factors to do the explanatory work. (Note that while Feser, *Five Proofs*, 83–84 considers and rejects the idea that the unity of parts A and B in one being could be explained by the postulation of a further part C, the neo-classical theistic (and, in Ingthorsson's case, non-theistic) proposal at hand is *not* one on which a *further part* is postulated to explain the unity of parts. The suggestion is not that there is some further part in addition to A and B that explains the unity of the being's parts. Instead, it is that (say) *A itself* explains the unity or togetherness of A and B. In general, if we are seeking to explain the unity of parts A and B within some composite object in terms of something internal to the composite object, either we'll cite A itself or B itself, or we'll postulate some further part C. Feser criticizes *only the latter approach*. The problem with the latter approach is that it will lead to an infinitely regressive postulation of additional parts. But denying the latter approach still leaves us with the possibility that either A itself or B itself is the explanation of the conjoined-ness or unity of A and B. Feser does not explore this possibility.)

35 Of course, it's not as though O would undergo some alteration in this process (were it to happen), since O wouldn't become something different. But still, there is *some* kind of change here, whether in the ontological inventory of what there is, or in the incorporation of what were previously O's parts into parts of something else, or in the truth values of propositions, or in the extensions of predicates, or in the passing away of a state, or whatever.

ill-situated (insofar as detractors of classical theism have perfectly legitimate alternative explanations of unity).

III.1 Mindedness

One final issue I wish to address in this section is Feser's inference to the mindedness of the absolutely simple being. Feser argues in premise twenty-two that "[e]verything is either a mind, or a mental content, or a material entity, or an abstract entity."³⁶ From this it is concluded that the absolutely simple being must be a mind.

Curiously, though, Feser gives no justification for this premise but instead cites Vallicella — who himself gives no justification for the claim.³⁷ Indeed, it seems eminently (epistemically) possible at least *in principle* that there be a non-physical or non-material, non-mental concrete entity. Simply consider an impersonal principle from which all complexity and multiplicity derives — akin to Plotinus's *One* (which, as we will see below, is prior in being to Mind). In fact, we might plausibly take the Neo-Platonic proof (ignoring its other problems) as an argument *for* this different category of thing.

Plotinus himself decidedly *rejected* a view according to which the absolutely simple, radically independent One (which transcends all multiplicity, qualification, and differentiation) is mental in the sense of something capable of thought and understanding. As Gavriluk notes, for Plotinus "Mind (*nous*), as the repository of the eternal Forms, represents a perfectly unified plurality, rather than perfect simplicity. For this reason, the divine *Nous* must be the second hypostasis, which derives from and is ontologically subordinate to the One."³⁸ The One's absolute simplicity prevents mentality, since mentality (for Plotinus) requires at least the duality of the knower and the known, a duality which emerges first in the Divine Mind (the *Nous*). This duality (multiplicity, plurality) is foreign to the One.³⁹

36 Feser, *Five Proofs*, 81.

37 Vallicella, *Paradigm Theory*, 255.

38 Paul L. Gavriluk, "Plotinus on Divine Simplicity," *Modern Theology* 35, no. 3 (2019), 442.

39 As Cohoe points out, thought and understanding presuppose a distinction between subject and object, whereas the One is beyond all distinctions. See Caleb M. Cohoe, "Why the One Cannot Have Parts: Plotinus on Divine Simplicity, Ontological Independence, and Perfect Being Theology," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 67, no. 269 (2017), 766–769.

This bridges nicely into the final problem for Feser’s inference to mindedness: it’s not at all clear how mindedness could be compatible with absolute simplicity. One problem derives from the (plausibly) necessary existence of abstracta. We might plausibly think that some propositions (say) are necessarily true and hence necessarily exist (provided that x cannot *be* anything (e.g., true, correspondent with reality, etc.) without existing).⁴⁰ Or we might follow realist intuitions about the necessary existence of numbers, universals, or what have you.

Trouble arises when we consider that (i) the existence of anything distinct from God presupposes God’s free creative act and (ii) abstracta are distinct from God. Point (i) is a core commitment of classical theism: God is the sole ultimate reality from which all else derives its being. As Kerr points out, God “is the unique subsisting source of being from which all existing things come.”⁴¹ Moreover, God is free to create or refrain from creating.⁴² And point (ii) seems evident: there’s a multiplicity of abstracta, but there isn’t a multiplicity of God. God is not identical to the number two, nor is he identical to the proposition that one and one make two, and nor is he identical to the universal *humanity*.

The result seems to be an inconsistent triad:

1. Abstracta (or some subset thereof) exist necessarily.
2. Abstracta are distinct from God.
3. Anything distinct from God requires God’s *free* creative bestowal of being — a bestowal God is free to give or not to give.

For given (3), anything distinct from God is contingent (i.e., possibly absent from reality) — it requires God’s creative actualization, something God is free to perform or not perform. But given (1) and (2), that can’t be the case. To

40 For an argument for the necessary existence of (some) propositions from their necessary truth, see Joshua L. Rasmussen, “From Necessary Truth to Necessary Existence”, *Polish Journal of Philosophy* 7, no. 1 (2013). I won’t expand on the point here, since Feser defends the necessary existence of abstracta (universals, propositions, etc.) in his Augustinian proof.

41 Kerr, *Aquinas*, 15.

42 Alexander R. Pruss, “Divine Creative Freedom”, in *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion* (Vol. 7), ed. Jonathan L. Kvanvig (Oxford Univ. Press, 2016) 213–214, Brian Leftow, “Two Pictures of Divine Choice”, in *Free Will and Classical Theism: The Significance of Freedom in Perfect Being Theology*, ed. Hugh J. McCann (Oxford Univ. Press, 2016), 152, and Joseph C. Schmid and R. T. Mullins, “The aloneness argument against classical theism”, *Religious Studies* (Forthcoming).

avoid the inconsistency, it seems that the classical theist must maintain one or more of the following:

4. Abstracta either exist contingently or do not exist at all.
5. Abstracta are identical to God.
6. Either God is necessitated or compelled to create something distinct from himself, or there exist things distinct from God not resulting from God's creative actualization.

None of (4)-(6) look very attractive for the classical theist, however. Claim (4) denies plausible realist intuitions either about the existence of abstracta or their necessary existence. Claim (5) seems clearly wrongheaded: surely God cannot be identical to the number two and the number seven, since two is even while seven is not even. God cannot be both even and not even.⁴³ Claim (6) also seems quite unappealing. Surely God couldn't be necessitated or compelled to create, and surely God must be fully provident and sovereign over the existence of everything distinct from himself (which he wouldn't be if there existed necessary abstracta over which he has no control). We have seen, moreover, that classical theism *itself* seems to commit to the denial of (6).

But perhaps there's a *via media*: locate abstracta *within* the divine mind as thoughts and concepts (or otherwise grounded in such things). This, however, seems inconsistent with absolute simplicity. So long as such abstracta are not identical to God, they will thereby be *parts* of God (per the classical theistic understanding of parthood canvassed in §2). They will be positive ontological items intrinsic to but distinct from God.

Even if this latter point is denied, a plausible mereological principle supports the same conclusion. This principle states that if *x* is intrinsic to *y*, and *x* is composite, then *y* is thereby composite (i.e., not absolutely simple). The principle is entailed by the classical theistic understanding of parthood. For suppose *x* is composite and intrinsic to *y*. Now suppose, for *reductio*, that *y* is non-composite. Well, since *x* is composite while *y* is non-composite, it follows that *x* is distinct from *y*. So, *x* is intrinsic to *y* but distinct from *y*. But that's precisely the classical theistic understanding of parthood. Hence, *y* is

⁴³ Similar points extend to clearly distinct propositions—e.g., 'one and one make two' versus 'nothing causes itself to exist'.

composite after all. But we assumed y was non-composite. Contradiction. Thus, the fact that x is composite and intrinsic to y entails that y is composite. (Given, of course, the classical theistic understanding of parthood.)

But according to the aforementioned *via media*, abstracta are intrinsic to God. So, if abstracta are composite, it would follow that God is composite (per the mereological principle).

But it's plausible that some abstracta *are* composite given the classical theist understanding of parthood. As we saw in §2, properties are explicitly conceived as *parts*. This is precisely why classical theists insist that God cannot have a multiplicity of properties, as that would introduce composition into God. But abstracta plausibly have a whole host of properties. For instance, if we reject deflationism about truth and instead adopt a correspondence theory according to which truth is a property of propositions, it follows that propositions are composite things. They also have properties of aboutness or representation, of correspondence, and so on. Or consider the number two. Surely it has properties like *being even*, *being prime*, and so on. If these (seemingly) common sense claims about abstracta are true, it follows that abstracta are composite things. And hence it follows — assuming that we locate abstracta in some way or another in the divine intellect — that God is composite. (Moreover, classical theists typically wish to affirm that there can only be one absolutely simple thing in principle — in which case, abstracta cannot be simple but instead must be composite.)

Not only does the Neo-Platonic proof not justify premise three, then, but it also doesn't deliver the mindedness of the absolutely simple being. And not only that, but it seems to militate *against* the mindedness of such a being (given other commitments of classical theism as well as certain core realist intuitions). Next I turn to new problems for the Neo-Platonic proof from Trinitarianism.

IV. TRINITARIANISM

Orthodox, conciliar Trinitarianism (henceforth 'Trinitarianism') has a variety of core commitments. Mullins identifies at least four: (i) there are three divine persons; (ii) the divine persons are not numerically identical to one

another; (iii) the divine persons share the same divine essence; and (iv) the divine persons are related so that there is only one God.⁴⁴

These core theses point to a distinction between *person* and *nature*. In particular, (T3) requires that *there is only one divine nature*. By contrast, (T1) requires that *there are three persons*. There is thus some distinction between person and nature here.

We need not get bogged down here in defining 'person' and 'nature', since nothing in my arguments to come crucially hinges on such definitions. For now, we can follow Timothy Pawl in understanding a person as a *hypostasis* (*supposit*) of a rational nature.⁴⁵ As for 'nature', we can understand it in terms of something's *essence*, the *what-it-is-to-be* that thing. In the context of Trinitarianism and the Incarnation, it is not some abstract Platonic universal but rather a concrete, immanent essence within something that makes it what it is.⁴⁶ In any case, it is important to keep this distinction between person and nature in mind as we proceed.

In the following sections, I will argue that the Neo-Platonic proof is inimical to Trinitarianism on numerous fronts.

VI.1 Uniqueness

The first problem derives from Feser's inference to the uniqueness of the absolutely simple being. Feser writes:

For suppose there were two or more noncomposite or utterly simple causes of things. Then there would have to be some *feature* the possession of which distinguishes one of them from the other. Noncomposite or simple cause A would differ from noncomposite or simple cause B insofar as A has feature F, which B lacks, and B has feature G, which A lacks. But in that case neither A nor B would really be simple or noncomposite after all. A would be a simple or noncomposite cause *plus* F, and B would be a simple or noncomposite cause *plus* G. F and G would be different *parts*, one of which each of these causes has and the other of which it lacks.⁴⁷

44 R. T. Mullins, "Hasker on the Divine Processions of the Trinitarian Persons", *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 9, no. 4 (2017), 183.

45 As Pawl articulates it, "X is a supposit (hypostasis) if and only if x is a complete being, incommunicable by identity, not apt to inhere in anything, and not sustained by anything" (Timothy J. Pawl, *The Incarnation* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2020), 6). A person, moreover, is a hypostasis of a rational nature.

46 *Ibid.*, 14–16.

47 Feser, *Five Proofs*, 74–75.

The central premise employed here seems to be that for there to be two or more x 's, there would have to be some feature in virtue of which they are individuated. And since the possession of such a feature entails composition, there could not in principle be two or more absolutely simple beings.

But this line of reasoning seems incompatible with Trinitarianism. For the exact same reasoning equally applies to there being two or more *divine persons*; the need for some individuating feature to distinguish two or more x 's seems a perfectly general one, applying to all x 's. The main reason favoring such a demand seems to be *explicability*: if there were no feature that one of x_1 or x_2 possesses that the other doesn't, then (so the reasoning goes) the fact that x_1 and x_2 are distinct is inexplicable. In other words, if x_1 and x_2 share all and only the same features, then the non-identity between x_1 and x_2 would be inexplicable. But this motivation seems entirely general, applying to any distinct items.

And if that's true, then it equally applies to divine persons. In order for there to be more than one divine person, there would have to be some feature that one had that the others lacked. But in that case — per Feser's own reasoning — the divine person would not be absolutely simple (and hence wouldn't be *divine* after all!).

Moreover, Feser's inference to uniqueness (which, as we've seen, seems inimical to Trinitarianism) plays an essential role in his argument. For without uniqueness, we face the quantifier shift problem: merely from the fact that each chain of causes-of-unity has a first non-composite member, it does not follow that there is a single first member for *all* such chains. And without uniqueness in place, the inferences to various other divine attributes are undercut. For instance, Feser's inference to omnipotence presupposes that every (possible) composite being must derive its being from the causal activity of the *single* absolutely simple being — for *only* then is it true that such a being is that from which all possible being (and all possible causal powers) derives.

Let's turn next to a second tension between the Neo-Platonic proof and Trinitarianism.

IV.2 NPCP and the Trinity

Consider again NPCP's primary motivation: explicability. More specifically, the compresence of distinct elements together into a unified being demands some explanation — and because the explanation cannot be in terms of the

being itself or one of its parts, an extrinsic cause (so the argument goes) is required.

But the exact same motivation for demanding an extrinsic cause of the unity of composite objects seems equally to apply to the multiplicity of divine persons unified in a single Godhead. In other words, there seems to be no justification for NPCP that doesn't also justify demanding a cause of any Trinitarian being. There seems to be no non-question-begging, non-arbitrary, principled way to delineate the demand for an extrinsic cause of unity in the case of things that are composites of (say) distinct attributes, or of essence and accident, or what have you (on the one hand) and things within which there is a multiplicity of distinct persons and processions (on the other hand).

Indeed, the fact of distinct x 's within a being — i.e., a multiplicity or differentiation among distinct ontological items — is precisely what requires an extrinsic cause in Plotinus's view. For Plotinus, the One's simplicity is utterly unqualified.⁴⁸ At "Enn. 6.9.4 Plotinus observes that... the One transcends all differentiations characteristic of being... Plotinian simplicity excludes any multiplicity."⁴⁹ Anything apart from the One requires a cause for the unity of its multiplicity, distinction, differentiation, and qualification. Hence, for Plotinus, a differentiation or multiplicity of distinct divine persons would demand an extrinsic sustaining cause.

Clearly the Trinitarian God cannot have an extrinsic sustaining cause of its being. But what, then, could explain the unity of the distinct persons in God? If the answer is that there's no explanation, then that seems to be a perfectly legitimate move for the detractor of the Neo-Platonic proof in explaining the most fundamental composite thing(s). If the answer is that it's simply metaphysically necessary that there be three distinct persons unified in one God, then that also seems to be a perfectly legitimate move for the detractor of the Neo-Platonic proof.

Perhaps the explanation is in terms of one of those very divine persons (the Father, say)? But once again this will undercut the Neo-Platonic proof. For this explanation amounts to the proposal that one of the x_1, x_2, \dots, x_n explains the unity of *those very* x 's. But once this kind of explanation is granted, then it seems that the unity of the fundamental composite object(s) could be

48 Gavriilyuk, "Plotinus", 442.

49 Ibid., 447–448.

explained in virtue of one (or more) of its *parts*. If one of those very *x*'s can explain the unity of them all, then it seems this should equally be the case when the ontological items in question (the *x*'s) are *parts*.⁵⁰ And hence it would not necessarily be the case that any composite object must be explained in terms of some extrinsic sustaining cause.

Perhaps there is some fourth thing, some fundamental aspect of God, that explains or accounts for their unity? But (i) this is incompatible with DDS (since this thing would be some positive ontological item within but distinct from God himself), and (ii) this reduces to the answer in the previous paragraph, since there's the further question of what explains the unity or togetherness or compresence of {Father, Son, Holy Spirit, this fourth fundamental aspect of God}. And any explanation in terms of the final element in the set is just to cite *one of the very x*'s among $x_1, x_2, \dots x_n$ to account for their unity.

Fundamentally, then, my challenge for the Trinitarian proponent of the Neo-Platonic proof is as follows. When it comes to explaining to unity (togetherness, conjoined-ness, compresence) of the distinct divine persons in one being (the Godhead or G), the explanation is either (i) internal to G, (ii) external to G, (iii) G itself, or else (iv) there is no explanation. But if the explanation is internal to G, then something *within* a unified plurality can explain the unity of said plurality — in which case, the same could apply to the objects within NPCP's domain of quantification, thereby undermining NPCP's demand for an outside explanation of such objects. If the explanation is external to G, then there is something outside of or external to God which explains something about God, which is obviously incompatible with classical theism. If the explanation is G itself, then an object within which there is a unified plurality can explain the unity of said plurality without recourse to any external thing — in which case, the same could apply to the objects within NPCP's domain of quantification, thereby undermining NPCP's demand for an outside explanation of such objects. Finally, if there is no explanation, then once again the same could apply to the domain of NPCP, thereby undermining it. Thus, either classical theism is false, or else NPCP (and, hence, the Neo-Platonic proof itself) is undermined.

In general, then, it seems that any proposal for explaining the unity of the distinct Trinitarian persons will undercut NPCP and *a fortiori* the Neo-

50 Again, in the very broad classical theistic understanding of parts.

Platonic proof. Trinitarianism is therefore inimical to the Neo-Platonic proof in yet another way.

V. CONCLUSION

We've canvassed a variety of responses to the Neo-Platonic proof in this article. We found first that premise three is both unjustified and dialectically ill-situated. We then found that the Neo-Platonic proof fails to deliver the mindedness of the absolutely simple being and arguably militates *against* mindedness. We then examined two tensions between Trinitarianism and the Neo-Platonic proof.

There are, of course, other lines of response I haven't explored in this article. For instance, one might adduce configurational or existential inertia—the thesis that composites (or at least ultimate, fundamental composites) retain their unity in the absence of both causal sustenance and causal destruction—in response to the demand for a sustaining cause of composite objects.⁵¹ Or one might challenge the constituent ontology underlying the argument. Or one might challenge the argument's reliance on the impossibility of infinitely descending chains of hierarchical dependence. Or one might challenge Feser's stage two inferences and instead opt for a view on which there is an absolutely simple, mindless, impersonal, universal principle or source of all multiplicity. And so on.

But concerning the lines of response I *have* explored, their aim is to *serve* debates about models of God and ultimate reality. They are meant to be *tools* that invite further inquiry. It is my hope that I have accomplished this task.⁵²

51 Configurational inertia is briefly adduced in Oppy, "On Stage One" as a response to the Neo-Platonic proof. It is essentially the thesis of existential inertia as applied to the persistent unity of composites. For more on existential inertia, see (*inter alia*) John Beaudoin "The world's continuance: divine conservation or existential inertia?", *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 61, no. 2 (2007), Edward Feser, "Existential Inertia and the Five Ways", *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 85, no. 2 (2011), Paul Audi, "Existential Inertia", *Philosophic Exchange* 48, no. 1 (2019), Schmid, "Existential inertia", and Schmid "Stage One".

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