

TRINITARIAN MYSTERIANISM AND A TRINIFORM UNIVERSE:  
*Answering de jure and de facto Objections to the Doctrine of the Trinity with Crisp's Chastened  
Mysterian Model, Van Til's Equal Ultimacy, and Bavinck's Organic Motif*

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A PAPER

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Christians believe in the Trinitarian God of Scripture. While we affirm that the word “Trinity” does not appear in the actual text of Scripture, we contend that one cannot read Scripture rightly without the doctrine of the Trinity. Indeed, the Trinity is a fundamental doctrine of Christianity, such that to deny it is to put oneself outside of the Christian faith. But along with this eminently important doctrine comes a “deep and difficult problem”<sup>1</sup> known as the “threeness-oneness problem.”<sup>2</sup> The problem for Christians is the necessity to affirm one God, Who is three Persons. This mysterious idea has prompted many to accuse the doctrine of incoherence and its observers of irrationality. With these claims in mind, in this paper we will seek to explicate a conception of God known as Trinitarian Mysterianism which seeks to demonstrate that, while a mystery, the Trinity is not a contradictory doctrine. In so doing, we will seek to answer the *de jure* objection against the Trinity. Then we will review the ancient problem of the One and the Many, and finish by arguing that when Trinitarian Mysterianism is paired with Bavinck’s Organic Motif and Van Til’s Absolute Personality, it can uniquely account for the problem of the One and the Many which serves to provide evidence for veracity of Trinitarian Mysterianism and the Christian world-and-life view, thus addressing the *de facto* objection.

### **Trinitarian Mysterianism**

As we begin our exploration of the *de jure* and *de facto* objections to Trinitarianism, it is important that we explain what we mean by our terms. We borrow this distinction from Alvin Plantinga who defines *de facto* objections as “objections to the *truth* of Christian belief”<sup>3</sup> and *de*

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<sup>1</sup> Jeffery E. Bower and Michael C. Rea, “Understanding the Trinity,” *Logos* 8 (2005): 145-57. Cited in Thomas McCall, *Which Trinity? Whose Monotheism?: Philosophical and Systematic Theologians on the Metaphysics of Trinitarian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010), 11.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), viii.

*jure* objections as “arguments or claims to the effect that Christian belief, whether or not true, is at any rate unjustifiable, or rationally unjustified, or irrational, or not intellectually respectable, or contrary to sound morality, or without sufficient evidence, or in some other way rationally unacceptable, not up to snuff from an intellectual point of view.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, in this section we will seek to answer the specific *de jure* objection prompted by the ‘threeness-oneness’ problem. In summarizing this *de jure* objection, Thomas McCall explains that, “The problem is not simply that there is mystery here- if the doctrine of the Trinity is true, after all, we should hardly be surprised that it is mysterious. The problem is that the doctrine seems to be logically inconsistent and thus necessarily false.”<sup>5</sup> The problem, then is that if the doctrine of God’s threeness and oneness is so blatantly contradictory, then it would actually be irrational for anyone to affirm it as true. But this problem “arises at the very heart of the Christian faith”<sup>6</sup> and is “essential to orthodox Christian belief”<sup>7</sup>, which would in turn, subject the entire Christian faith to the charge of irrationality.

If the Trinity was a less important doctrine, a peripheral issue of denominational preference, then it could be briskly jettisoned, the *de jure* objection could be easily sidestepped, and the Christian faith vindicated of contradiction. But this *apparently* contradictory, mysterious doctrine, perhaps with the exception of the doctrine of the Incarnation, “constitutes the central mystery of the Christian faith and should illumine the entirety of the Christian life.”<sup>8</sup> The Trinity is, as Christians argue, a revealed truth of God’s divine self-revelation in Scripture. Moreover, the doctrine is not merely found in a single verse here or there, nor is it relegated to an obscure footnote- it is a ubiquitous biblical truth.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid. ix.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas McCall, *Which Trinity? Whose Monotheism?: Philosophical and Systematic Theologians on the Metaphysics of Trinitarian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010), 11.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Gilles Emery, O.P., and Matthew Levering, “Introduction” in *The Oxford Handbook of The Trinity* ed. Emery, Levering (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011), 1.

One of the most explicit expressions of the diversity in the Godhead comes from the prologue to the Fourth Gospel, a book which includes the pre-existence of the Son of God; the deity of the Logos; the Incarnation of the Logos; as well as the personhood of the Father and the Holy Spirit.<sup>9</sup> The prologue begins, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of all men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”<sup>10</sup> Here we see the ‘Word’ (*Logos*, λογος), was in the beginning, the Word was *with* God in the beginning, and the Word *was* God in the beginning. This Word is to be identified with the Creator God since all things were made through him, and whom nothing was made without. So, God the Word was with God in the beginning and created everything and was also God himself. These verses, then, teach that “The ‘Word does not by Himself make up the entire Godhead; nevertheless the divinity that belongs to the rest of the Godhead belongs also to Him’ ... ‘The Word was *with* God, God’s eternal Fellow; the Word *was* God, God’s own Self.”<sup>11</sup>

At verse 1:14, we then see that this Word “became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.” Here we are introduced to another distinction in the Godhead, ‘the Father’. According to Ben Witherington III, God is referred to as ‘Father’ “some 120 times [in] this Gospel.”<sup>12</sup> So, now we have God, and we have the Father, who is God, and the Son of the Father, who is the Word and also God. Picking it back up at verse seventeen, we see that although “the law was given through Moses; grace and

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<sup>9</sup> Ben Witherington III, “The Trinity in the Johannine Literature” in *The Oxford Handbook of The Trinity* ed. Gilles Emery, O.P., & Matthew Levering (eds.). (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011), 69.

<sup>10</sup> John 1:1-5, ESV.

<sup>11</sup> Tasker and Clowney Cited in D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991.), 117.

<sup>12</sup> Ben Witherington III, “The Trinity in the Johannine Literature” in *The Oxford Handbook of The Trinity* ed. Gilles Emery, O.P., & Matthew Levering (eds.). (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011), 70.

truth came through Jesus Christ.” And then John boldly proclaims that “No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known.”<sup>13</sup> This Eternal Word, God’s own Fellow and God’s very own Self-expression, the Son of God the Father, stepped into human history as the person of Jesus Christ and revealed grace and truth as he made God known. D.A. Carson explains that “This Word-made-flesh, himself God, is nevertheless differentiable from God, and as such is intimate with God; as man, as God’s incarnate Self-expression, he *has made* God *known*.”<sup>14</sup> Carson goes on to say that the Greek word used for made-him-known, *exēgēsato*, is the word we derive ‘exegesis’ from, which leads Carson to say that “we might almost say that Jesus is the exegesis of God.”<sup>15</sup>

Continuing on to verse thirty-two, we see that “John [the Baptist] bore witness: “I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit. And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God.’”<sup>16</sup> So, now we have The Holy Spirit of God, who descended and stayed on the Incarnate Word/Son of God, Jesus Christ, and God the Father.

With passages like these in mind, which are diffused throughout Scripture, it is no wonder why the great Christian creeds confess that,

the catholic faith is this: That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity; Neither confounding the persons nor dividing the substance. For there is one person of the Father, another of the Son, and another of the Holy Spirit. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit is all one, the glory equal, the majesty coeternal. . . . So the Father

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<sup>13</sup> D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991.), 127.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> John 1:32-34, ESV.

is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God; and yet they are not three Gods, but one God.<sup>17</sup>

The doctrine of the Trinity is deeply rooted in the Christian faith because it is deeply rooted in Scripture as well as orthodox Christian history. Christianity is Trinitarianism.

Oliver Crisp defines Trinitarianism as “the view that God is essentially triune” but goes on to say that Trinitarianism “is not commensurate with every doctrine of the Trinity.”<sup>18</sup> There are some ‘doctrines of the Trinity’ that are not orthodox doctrines of the Trinity in that they neglect some essential aspect of the biblical truth expounded in the creeds and confessions concerning God’s triunity, and thus they do not rightly fall within Crisp’s understanding of Trinitarianism *simpliciter*. Crisp suggests that Trinitarianism “is just the view that God is essentially triune, as expressed in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan symbol of AD 381.”<sup>19</sup> In a footnote, he justifies his claim against those who might wonder why an appeal to a symbol should suffice rather than a verse from Scripture, “It is convenient to appeal to the Nicene-Constantinopolitan symbol even if one thinks this simply reflects the teaching of Scripture, because all catholic Christians agree that this symbol adequately expresses the doctrine of the Trinity.”<sup>20</sup> With this in mind then, Crisp summarizes the core claims of orthodox Christian Trinitarianism as such:

- (T1) There is exactly one God.
  - (T2) There are exactly three coeternal divine persons “in” God: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
  - (T3) The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are not identical.
  - (T4) The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are consubstantial.
- Taken together, (T1)-(T4) constitute Trinitarianism.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Cited by Oliver Crisp in *Analyzing Doctrine: Towards a Systematic Theology* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2019), 77.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, n.19.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* C.f. James Anderson’s remarkably similar (which perhaps should not come as a surprise as they are both Christian analytic theologians in the PCA) list in *Paradox in Christian Theology* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2007), 30-31.

Crisp goes on to explain that these constituents are not a specific interpretation, model, or particular doctrine of the Trinity, rather, it is just a set of conditions necessary for any interpretation, model, or particular account to count as Trinitarianism. He sums up the conditions in the affirmation that “God is one in some very strong sense of “one” (i.e. numerical identity or at least generic sameness) yet subsists in three persons- namely, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”<sup>22</sup>

There have been many models put forth over the centuries which sought, in their own ways, to save the doctrine from the *de jure* objection, but any models which are to account for Trinitarianism, must satisfy the *desiderata* above. Rather than expounding on and weighing the various modern models against Crisp’s *desiderata* and measuring their success against the *de jure* objection, which has been done masterfully by others elsewhere,<sup>23</sup> we might find more success by taking a shortcut through the philosophy of mind, specifically, the philosophy of consciousness. This shortcut, if successful, will show that ultimately there is something paradoxical or mysterious in the very *desiderata* of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan symbol itself, such that if any model explains away the mystery, then it fails to uphold Trinitarianism. Thus, any model which upholds Trinitarianism, will also uphold the mystery therein and any model which seeks to explicate the Trinity in a non-mysterious way will fail.

We turn now to the philosophy of consciousness. According to Jaegwon Kim, “Nothing could be more familiar to us than the phenomenon of consciousness.”<sup>24</sup> He explains that “We are conscious at every moment of our waking lives; it is a ubiquitous and unsurprising feature of everyday existence- except when we are in deep sleep, in a coma, or otherwise, well,

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>23</sup> C.f. James Anderson’s analysis of recent philosophers and theologians attempts in *Paradox in Christian Theology* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2007), 11-59; and Thomas H. McCall’s analysis in *Which Trinity? Whose Monotheism?: Philosophical and Systematic Theologians on the Metaphysics of Trinitarian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010), 11-55.; and Crisp’s analysis in *Analyzing Doctrine: Towards a Systematic Theology* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2019), 78-84.

<sup>24</sup> Kim, 263.

unconscious.”<sup>25</sup> The expression ‘there is something it is like’, is convenient way of expressing consciousness, as well a helpful thought experiment for determining what in fact *has* consciousness. This expression was made famous by Thomas Nagel in his, now canonical, 1974 essay, “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?”<sup>26</sup> Expounding on this expression, Kim says, “this is the idea that to say that a creature has conscious experience means that there is “something it is like to *be* that creature.” And there is a collateral idea: To say that a state of a creature is conscious is to say that there is “something it is like for the creature to be in that state.”<sup>27</sup> So, using Nagel’s term, we can ask ourselves ‘what is it like to be a bat’, and ponder about a bat’s phenomenally conscious states. When it comes to thinking about bats, “someone might have a complete knowledge of a bat’s neurophysiology; he might have a complete knowledge of all the functional mechanisms that enable bats to live and navigate; but all the same, there would be something left out of this person’s knowledge: What is it like to be a bat? What does it feel like? And this is the essence of consciousness.”<sup>28</sup>

Nagel goes on to use this concept as an argument against a Naturalistic eliminativism, which sought to eliminate the first-person perspective in favor of the more ‘scientific’ third-person perspective. Nagel argues that there is a qualitative first-person experience, a ‘what it is like to be that person’ which resists the eliminativist agenda on the pains of self-refutation. For the eliminativist can only do their eliminative philosophy from a first-person perspective.<sup>29</sup> As John Searle says, “For any conscious being, there is a what-it-is-like aspect to his existence. And this is

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<sup>25</sup> Kim, 263.

<sup>26</sup> Thomas Nagel, *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 165-80.

<sup>27</sup> Kim, 263.

<sup>28</sup> Searle, *Mind*, 60.

<sup>29</sup> A point noticed and forcefully argued by C.S. Lewis back in 1945. C.f. C.S. Lewis, “Meditation in a Toolshed” in *C.S. Lewis Essay Collection & Other Short Stories* (Great Britain: HarperCollins Publishers, 2000).

left out of any objective account of consciousness because an objective account cannot explain the subjective character of consciousness.”<sup>30</sup>

So now, armed with this what-it-is-like aspect of consciousness, we may return to Crisp’s *desiderata* of Trinitarianism in order to show that they are fundamentally mysterious. Remember that (T1)-(T-4) can be summarized as “God is one in some very strong sense of “one” (i.e. numerical identity or at least generic sameness) yet subsists in three persons- namely, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”<sup>31</sup> With this in mind we may ask four questions about God’s consciousness:

- (C1) Is there something it is like to be God?
- (C2) Is there something it is like to be the Father?
- (C3) Is there something it is like to be the Son?
- (C4) Is there something it is like to be the Holy Spirit?

The fact that we *can* answer, and according to Trinitarianism, *ought* to be able to answer these four questions in the affirmative, demonstrates that there is something deeply mysterious, if not outright contradictory about Trinitarianism. If there is something it is like to be God, then presumably, ‘God’ is a unified consciousness such that there really is something it is like for Him experience His divine nature from His first-person perspective. But likewise, if there is something it is like to be the Father, the Son, or the Spirit, then it seems we have four consciousnesses where we should have one or three. Asking Nagel’s question disabuses us of relative identity games. We believe in one God. God is conscious, there is something it is like to be Him. We believe in three persons. There is something that it is like to be each person of the Godhead; the Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Spirit, etc... Thus, any orthodox model of the Trinity will have to deal with this fundamentally paradoxical set of consciousness questions. With this in mind, we concur with

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<sup>30</sup> Searle, *Mind*, 60

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

James Anderson in his contention that, “As the debate stands today, no writer from the first century to the twenty-first century has offered an explication of the doctrine of the Trinity that is both clearly orthodox and free from apparent contradiction. It seems that the careful theologian inevitably faces a dilemma: that of embracing either paradox or heterodoxy.”<sup>32</sup>

While Anderson is pessimistic about any model, past or present, being able to hammer out the paradox inherent in Trinitarianism, he is not as pessimistic about having a rational defense against the *de jure* objection. Anderson proposes his own model “for rational affirmation of paradoxical theology”<sup>33</sup> which seeks to defend Christian paradox as an “apparent contradiction” rather than a genuine contradiction such as affirming both *A* and  $\sim A$  at the same time and in the same manner. Anderson explains that

the appearance of contradiction does not *entail* the actuality of contradiction any more than, say the appearance of contrition entails the actuality of contrition. Taking the point further, it is worth reminding ourselves that appearances are always in the eye of the beholder: what appears contradictory to one person might not appear contradictory to another. Just how things appear to a person will depend on an array of factors such as background knowledge, comprehensional ability, prior experience, preconceptions, and so forth.<sup>34</sup>

Anderson goes on to define the mystery we find in Trinitarianism a MACRUE: Merely Apparent Contradiction Resulting from Unarticulated Equivocation.<sup>35</sup> He then explicates other Christian doctrines which provide warrant for a Christian who affirms a MACRUE like the Trinity. According to Christian orthodoxy, God is *apprehensible* but not fully, that is, God is also

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<sup>32</sup> James Anderson, *Paradox in Christian Theology* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2007), 59.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 218.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* 221.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* 222.

*incomprehensible*, “Although God can be known in part, he cannot be known fully and exhaustively.”<sup>36</sup> According to Anderson’s account, “the doctrine of divine incomprehensibility should lead us to *anticipate* paradox in some of our theological knowledge. As such, Christians ought not to be in the least surprised to find MACRUEs arising in their systematic theorizing about God- and particularly so when enquiring into realms as profound as God’s triune nature and the incarnation of God the Son.”<sup>37</sup>

Thus, incomprehensibility, which arises out of a healthy respect for the Creator-creature distinction, and which also takes seriously the Creator-creature relation, gives rise to the doctrine of divine accommodation, provides Christians with an expected MACRUE precisely at the point of Trinitarianism. However, incomprehensibility does not give us a reason to believe that all or even most of our theorizing about God and His world will result in MACRUEs. Anderson argues that it is only when we are theorizing in order to comprehend the incomprehensible Triune God, and perhaps on the point of the incarnation as well, that we should expect to find MACRUEs.

C.S. Lewis develops a similar model to explain the warranted MACRUE of the Trinity using different dimensions as a model:

You know that in space you can move in three ways- the left or right, backwards or forwards, up or down. Every direction is either one of these three or a compromise between them. They are called the three Dimensions. Now notice this. If you are using only one dimension, you could draw only a straight line. If you are using two, you could draw a figure: say, a square. And a square is made up of four straight lines. Now a step further. If

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 236.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* 241.

you have three dimensions, you can then build what we call a solid body: say, a cube- a thing like a dice or a lump of sugar. And a cube is made up of six squares.<sup>38</sup>

Lewis then expounds on his form of Trinitarian Mysterianism, using his dimensions model to explain why we cannot fully understand a three-personal Being,

Now the Christian account of God involves just the same principle. The human level is a simple and rather empty level. On the human level one person is one being, and any two persons are two separate beings- just as, in two dimensions (say on a flat sheet of paper) one square is one figure, and any two squares are two separate figures. On the Divine level you still find personalities; but up there you find them combined in new ways which we, who do not live on that level, cannot imagine. In God's dimension, so to speak, you find a being who is three Persons while remaining one Being, just as a cube is six squares while remaining one cube. Of course we cannot fully conceive a Being like that: just as, if we were so made that we perceived only two dimensions in space we could never properly imagine a cube.<sup>39</sup>

Elsewhere, Lewis more explicitly finishes this line of Trinitarian Mysterianism based on incomprehensibility,

God has a positive structure which we could never have guessed in advance, any more than a knowledge of squares would have enabled us to guess at a cube. He contains 'persons' (three of them) while remaining one God, as a cube contains six squares while remaining one solid body. We cannot comprehend such a structure any more than the Flatlanders could comprehend a cube. But we can at least comprehend our incomprehension, and see

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<sup>38</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 1952), 161.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 162. C.f. Oliver Crip's analysis of Flatland along the same lines as Lewis in *Analyzing Doctrine: Towards a Systematic Theology* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2019), 96-99.

that if there is something beyond personality it *ought* to be incomprehensible in that sort of way.<sup>40</sup>

Oliver Crisp, appropriating aspects from both Lewis's and Anderson's account of incomprehensibility, and instead opts for the word "transcendence" which incorporates incomprehensibility as well as accommodation and the Creator-creature distinction. When we add the doctrine of transcendence, to the *desiderata* of Trinitarianism (T1)-(T4) we end up with an account of chastened Trinitarian mysterianism which is a model that provides warrant for Trinitarianism *simpliciter* and thus avoids the *de jure* objection. Crisp argues:

MODEL: A simplified conceptual framework of description by means of which complex sets of data, systems, and processes may be organized and understood.

MYSTERY: A truth that is intelligible in principle but that may not be entirely intelligible to human beings in their current state of cognitive development.

TRINITY: the conjunction of dogmatic propositions concerning the divine nature, expressing the claim that God is one in essence and subsists in three persons, that are found in the dogmatic deposit of the ecumenical creeds, especially the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Symbol, and that reflect (a particular way of understanding) the teaching of Scripture and the apostolic faith. The dogmatic core of this conjunction of claims is as follows:

(T1) There is exactly one God.

(T2) There are exactly three coeternal divine persons "in" God: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

(T3) The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are not identical.

(T4) The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are consubstantial.

TRANCENDENCE: God is transcendent in virtue of being the creator of all things.

(1) The triunity of the divine nature is an instance of MYSTERY because God is transcendent (as per TRANCENDENCE).

(2) Human beings cannot apprehend the triunity of God absent divine revelation.

(3) In revealing himself to us, God accommodates himself to the epistemic limitations of human beings. (Presumably, this includes allowing for the noetic effects of sin.)

(4) TRINITY is a revealed dogma (that is, a doctrine that has a particular canonical form).

(5) TRINITY provides a dogmatic framework for understanding the divine nature that is theologically minimal.

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<sup>40</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Miracles* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1974), 135-36.

- (6) TRINITY does not *explain* how God is triune; it does not in and of itself offer a particular MODEL of the Godhead; it is metaphysically underdetermined. (for this reasons it is consistent with more than one dogmatic extrapolation, including a range of Trinitarian doctrines and MODELS.)
- (7) The terms “person” and “essence,” and their cognates that demarcate the way in which God is three and the way in which God is one TRINITY, are referring terms that are placeholders; we do not have a clear conceptual grip on their semantic content. (This is consistent with the claim that we may have a partial, piecemeal, or analogous sense of these terms.)
- (8) Trinity is consistent with MYSTERY.<sup>41</sup>

Thus, given Crisp’s chastened Trinitarian mysterianism, which is informed by Lewis and Anderson’s accounts, Christians are able to be warranted in believing in the Trinity in spite of its apparently contradictory nature. Thus, the *de jure* objection collapses down into the *de facto* objection. So, in arguing for the rationality of affirming the doctrine of the Trinity, the best way to provide warrant turns out to be *more* Christian theology, not less!<sup>42</sup>

### **The Problem of the One and the Many**

Having thus dealt with the *de jure* objection to the Trinity, we now move to consider the *de facto* objection, that is, the truth of the matter. While we sought to provide an internal consistency and warrant for rationally affirming the mystery of the Trinity in our last section, moving forward we will seek to provide positive evidence for affirming the mystery of the Trinity as well, or at minimum, provide more support for Trinitarian Mysterianism as a model. In seeking to provide positive evidence, we come now to the ancient problem of the One and the Many.

In reviewing the problem, philosopher-theologians Geisler and Feinberg, note that, “One of the most persistent problems in philosophy is that of the one and the many.”<sup>43</sup> They then

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<sup>41</sup> Oliver Crip, *Analyzing Doctrine: Towards a Systematic Theology* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2019), 99-100.

<sup>42</sup> C.f. Richard Muller’s PRRD, V4, *The Triunity of God*, for an analysis of the Reformers’ views on God as a Mystery beyond reason. pp. 151.

<sup>43</sup> Norman Geisler and Paul Feinberg, *Introduction to Philosophy* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), 167

rehearse the problem by asking, “Is reality one or many or both? If reality is one, then how do we explain its apparent multiplicity? If reality is really many, then how do we explain the seeming oneness or unity of reality? Finally, if reality is both one *and* many, is the one in the many, or is the many in the one? In other words, which is most basic- the one or the many?”<sup>44</sup>

Gordon Clark traces the problem of the One and the Many back to the beginning of Western philosophy. Starting at least with the Milesians in the 500s B.C., Clark states that “Philosophy begins with the reduction of multiplicity to unity.”<sup>45</sup> William James deemed, this problem “the most pregnant of all the dilemmas of philosophy.”<sup>46</sup> And in reference to this problem of the One and the Many, Mortimer Adler argued that “the disagreement on this single point changes the perspective on everything else.”<sup>47</sup> He further explained that “the philosophers who magnify either the one or the many behold universes more radically dissimilar than the same object looked at from opposite ends of a telescope.”<sup>48</sup> This problem, however, is often considered an ancient problem of armchair philosophy. In considering the problem, we might think back to great armchair philosopher like Thales, who was the inventor of philosophy in Clark’s eyes. Thales was the first Monist, as he sought to reduce all multiplicity he saw around him in the world to an ultimate unity- he sought to find the One over against the Many. For Thales, the basic stuff, the ‘one thing’ which everything was made of, was water. All diversity is ultimately unified in the unity which is water.<sup>49</sup> Others came after him and argued for an ultimate diversity, or ‘many’, such as atomism which argued that an ultimate unity is illusory. Or others who argued for a principle of flux, such that all is an ever-changing diversity not unified whole.

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Gordon H. Clark, *Thales to Dewey*, (Trinity Foundation, 1957), 19.

<sup>46</sup> William James, “The One and The Many” in *Philosophy: The Classic Readings*, ed. David E. Cooper & Peter S. Fosl (West Sussex: Blackwell Publishing, 2010) 784.

<sup>47</sup> Mortimer J. Adler, *Syntopicon vol. II* (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc. 1952) 284.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Gordon H. Clark, *Thales to Dewey*, (Trinity Foundation, 1957), 21-22.

But this problem was not limited to the pre-Socratics, in fact it finds its ultimate expression in the philosophy of Plato. Scott Oliphint recounts the problem as a “complex, multi-faceted philosophical subject.” He goes on to say that the

two primary aspects of the problem are metaphysical and epistemological.

Metaphysically, the problem tends to take on the language of universals and particulars.

Universals, roughly, are the referents that are designed to apply to many various things...questions of nominalism (are universals only *names*?) and realism (are universals real *things*?) occupied a large segment of medieval philosophical debate.

Epistemologically (not unrelated to the metaphysical), the problem becomes how we might identify many particular things as *particular* while at the same time identifying such things as having common (universal) properties.<sup>50</sup>

Oliphint recognizes that the problem seems abstract and aloof, but he argues that “*philosophically speaking* it is one of the preeminent problems with which to grapple.”<sup>51</sup> He then provides an everyday example for the unconvinced,

in order to identify a certain thing as a (particular) dog, one must have a (universal) concept of “dogness” (distinct from a concept of a banana or a car) that provides certain metaphysical and epistemological parameters to such an ascription. In this case, therefore, the one and the many problem is an attempt to explain what the world is like, and how we might meaningfully speak about it.<sup>52</sup>

Edward Feser explains the problem of the ‘one over the many’ (as it’s often called) as he argues for universals like Plato’s forms or Oliphint’s dogness,

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<sup>50</sup> In Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* 4th ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 47, n.7.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

Universals like *triangularity* and *redness* are not reducible to any particular triangle or red thing, nor even to any collection of triangles or red things. For any particular triangle or red thing, or even the whole collection of these things, could go out of existence, and yet *triangularity* and *redness* could come to be exemplified once again in some new triangle or red thing. These universal also could be, and often are, exemplified even when no human mind is aware of this fact. Hence *triangularity*, *redness* and other universals are neither material things nor collections of material things, nor dependent on human minds for their existence.<sup>53</sup>

Mortimer Adler comments on the problem as it arises in Plato, “For Plato, the distinction between the one and the many enters into the analysis of almost any object- such as pleasure or virtue or knowledge, Anything, viewed under the aspect of its being or its becoming, its definite sameness or its indefinite otherness and variety, must be discussed both as a one and as a many.”<sup>54</sup> Adler points out that, “Whether it is full of exasperating subtleties or a treasure of true wisdom, the discussion of the one and the many- in itself and in relation to being and becoming, the intelligible and the sensible, the definite and the infinite, the same and the other, universals and particulars, wholes and parts, the simple and the complex, the indivisible and the continuous- is a discussion which seems unavoidable to the ancients.”<sup>55</sup> But while it is tempting to think of this problem merely as one for the ancients as they sat around musing about things they could not possibly comprehend, Adler says “the problems in whose analysis one and many seem to be involved recur in every period of western thought.”<sup>56</sup> Which includes our own.

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<sup>53</sup> Edward Feser, *Philosophy of Mind* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2005), 90.

<sup>54</sup> Mortimer J. Adler, *Syntopicon vol. II* (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc. 1952) 283.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

We see this problem arise in various subdisciplines of philosophy even today. One thinks of the debate between the logical atomists and their pluralism of facts vs. Donald Davison's Slingshot argument, co-opted from Frege, which seems to demonstrate that there is only one great 'Fact'.<sup>57</sup> Or Susan Haack's discussion of "monism versus pluralism"<sup>58</sup> in the philosophy of logic, Ross Inman's discussion of property "Monists and Atomists" in regards to his Tracking argument,<sup>59</sup> or Robert Koons and Timothy Pickavance's discussion of composition, "A single thing is always one, and some things are always many. Unity or one-ness seems to be contrary to many-ness or plurality. If a single thing is identical, in the strict sense, to many things, that that [sic] thing would have to be simultaneously one and many, an apparent contradiction.<sup>60</sup> Or lastly, we might consider the closely related mereological Problem of the Many as rehearsed by Michael Loux and Thomas Crisp,

The problem again: a single, puffy cloud floats high overhead, the aggregate of many, tiny particles of water. View from afar, the boundary between cloud and surrounding sky is sharply define. Viewed up close, the boundary is anything but sharp; near the could edges, the density of water particles fades gradually. Get further from the cloud, and though there are water particles scattered here and there, it's unclear whether to count them as parts of the cloud. Pick any two of these borderline cloud particles- A and B, call them. There is the aggregate which is the cloud, the aggregate which is all of the cloud and A but not B, and the aggregate which is all the cloud and B but not A. Question, now: why don't each of these aggregates count as a cloud? They are *very* similar! Each seems

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<sup>57</sup> C.f. Stephen Neale, *Facing Facts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>58</sup> Susan Haack, *Philosophy of Logics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Pres, 1978), xiv.

<sup>59</sup> Ross D. Inman, *Substance and the Fundamentality of the Familiar: A Neo-Aristotelian Mereology* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 207.

<sup>60</sup> Robert C. Koons and Timothy H. Pickavance, *Metaphysics: The Fundamentals* (West Sussex, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2015), 134.

as well suited to being a cloud as the others. Strictly speaking, it seems we've many clouds here, contradiction common-sense opinion that there is just one. So the Problem of the Many.<sup>61</sup>

So, the ancient problem of the One and the Many is not just for the ancients, as it turns out, it is a philosophical problem that reaches out into every field of philosophy, and more than that, every aspect of human life. But what are we to then make of this problem? How might we answer it? Should we opt for Monism, Pluralism, or some position in between? How would we answer the problem of vagueness or the charge of arbitrariness if we picked some halfway point?

### **Equal Ultimacy and The Organic Motif**

Here we set out to answer the problem of the One and the Many in line with what we articulated above via Crisp, Anderson, and Lewis. It is our contention that Trinitarian Mysterianism actually matches the mystery we find in the One and the Many problem, which is exactly what we would expect to find if that kind of God is the God who created the universe. Following Cornelius Van Til, we argue that in God, who is Triune, there is an equal ultimacy of unity (oneness) and diversity (Threeness). Neither aspect is more fundamental than the other. God is not ultimately one in a way that would contradict His threeness. Nor is He somehow three to the detriment of his oneness. Think back to Crisp's *desiderata*,

- (T1) There is exactly one God.
  - (T2) There are exactly three coeternal divine persons "in" God: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
  - (T3) The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are not identical.
  - (T4) The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are consubstantial.
- Taken together, (T1)-(T4) constitute Trinitarianism.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup>Michael J. Loux and Thomas M. Crisp, *Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction* 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York, Routledge, 2017), 251.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. C.f. James Anderson's remarkably similar (I guess that's no surprise as they are both Christian analytic theologians) list in *Paradox in Christian Theology* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2007), 30-31.

As we have seen, the Trinitarian nature of God is a MACRUE for us. God is conscious and each person of the Trinity is conscious. Since this is the case, we must then affirm the equal ultimacy of Threeness and Oneness in God if we are to remain within orthodox Christianity. God is not, at bottom a single unity, as the heresy of Modalism would affirm. Nor is God, at bottom, a diversity, such as the heresy of Tritheism would affirm. At bottom, God is One and God is Three- neither is more ultimate than the other, but each are equally ultimate in God. God is one conscious person and God is three conscious persons. We may pray to God, and we may pray to the Father by the power of the Holy Spirit in the name of Jesus. Coupled with Crisp's Trinitarian Mysterianism, we may affirm that although mysterious, the equal ultimacy of unity and diversity in the Godhead is an essential truth of Christianity, and due to God's transcendence, it is a warranted mystery for us.

But while Van Til argues that we must affirm the equal ultimacy of unity and diversity in the Godhead, Camden Bucey, commenting out Van Til's equal ultimacy, argues that Van Til is not stating a flat-out contradiction and hiding behind mystery, but rather he opts for a perichoretic notion:

The equal ultimacy of divine unity and diversity is encapsulated in what Van Til termed the representational principle: "The foundation of the representational principle among men is the fact that the Trinity exists in the form of a mutually exhaustive representation of the three Persons that constitute it." In reference to the *ousia* (the essence, the unity of the Godhead), no single *hypostasis* (each person, the diversity of the Godhead) is privileged in its representation. Insofar as the Trinity has been revealed to men, each

*hypostasis* has been equally represented. The whole of the Godhead represents each member, and each member is an exhaustive representation of the whole.<sup>63</sup>

Bucey goes on to note that Van Til defined ‘person’ in the Augustinian sense, “as a center of self-consciousness”<sup>64</sup> and describe God as Absolute personality. Bucey explains Van Til’s reasoning behind this term,

Van Til sympathized with the concerns of twentieth-century British and German absolute idealists, who insisted that the epistemological foundation be understood as a complete system. He also interacted with the Boston personalists, who posited that ultimate reality must be absolutely personal. For Van Til, the triune God, as an independent and underived self-conscious person, satisfies these requirements. Van Til maintained that “if God is left out of the picture it is up to the human mind to furnish the unity that must bind together the diversity of factual existence.” For him, nothing less than absolute personality is a sufficient metaphysical precondition for maintaining unity among diversity. Only God’s absolute personality provides the necessary “personal atmosphere” required for human knowledge.<sup>65</sup>

Bucey is also careful to note that in affirming the equal ultimacy of unity and diversity in God as absolute personality, Van Til is not arguing that God is one and three persons in the same *exact* sense,

Van Til uses a different sense of the term “person” with reference to the “whole Godhead” than do the ecumenical creeds with reference to the individual *hypostases*. Van Til is not affirming that God is one *hypostasis* and three *hypostases*. When Van Til

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<sup>63</sup> Camden Bucey, “The Trinity and Monotheism” in *Redeeming the Life of the Mind*, John Frame, Wayne Grudem, John Hughes (eds.). (Wheaton: Crossway, 2017), 172.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.* 173.

affirms that God is one person and three persons, he is speaking of persons in a philosophical sense, as centers of consciousness. We may love, worship, and commune with the Godhead as a person even as we may do so with the Father, Son, or Spirit specifically. Van Til facilitates this by understanding the mutual, exhaustive, and self-conscious indwelling of the persons in the Godhead.”<sup>66</sup>

So then, armed with a doctrine of perichoretic absolute personality, Van Til is able to answer our four consciousness questions in the affirmative while maintaining the mystery that there is One God, who is Three persons.

- (C1) Is there something it is like to be God?
- (C2) Is there something it is like to be the Father?
- (C3) Is there something it is like to be the Son?
- (C4) Is there something it is like to be the Holy Spirit?

Finally, we end with Herman Bavinck’s Organic Motif. According to James Eglinton, Bavinck’s Organic Motif is “a richly Trinitarian doctrine of God as received by the Patristic and Reformation traditions... and [] it accounts for the triformity so abundant throughout all created reality. God as archetypal (triune) unity-in-diversity is the basis for all the subsequent (triform) archetypal cosmic unity-in-diversity.”<sup>67</sup> According to Bavinck (by way of Eglinton), “Trinity *ad intra* leads to organicism *ad extra*.”<sup>68</sup> What this phrase means is that since in God there is a fundamental unity-in-diversity, what Van Til calls the equal ultimacy of an absolute personality, there will naturally be triformity, i.e. a fundamental unity-in-diversity, in the universe. Bavinck, in his *Reformed Dogmatics*, says,

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid. 175.

<sup>67</sup> James Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism: Towards a New Reading of Herman Bavinck’s Organic Motif* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2012), 54.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 72.

There is a most profuse diversity [in the cosmos] and yet, in that diversity, there is also a superlative kind of unity. The foundation for both diversity and unity is in God... Here is a unity that does not destroy but rather maintains diversity, and a diversity that does not come at the expense of unity, but rather unfolds it in its riches. In virtue of this unity the world can, metaphorically be called an organism, in which all the parts are connected with each other and influence each other reciprocally.<sup>69</sup>

According to Bavinck then, the problem of the One and Many which we find diffused throughout our disciplines, is actually a fundamental aspect of the universe. The uni-verse is actually a type of *vestigia trinitatis* evidence for the God of Trinitarian Mysterianism. Our inability to solve the problem of the One and the Many as it crops up in our fields of study provides evidence for the archetypal equal ultimacy of the One and the Many we find in the Trinity. Rather than having to look for triads all over creation, instead we find God's triformity, his unity-in-diversity, the equal ultimacy of His absolute personality, diffused throughout His creation. Thus, in conjunction with Crisp's Trinitarian Mysterianism, Van Til's Equal Ultimacy of unity and diversity and Bavinck's Organic Motif of Trinity *ad intra* leading to organism *ad extra*, we are able to see fundamental mystery in God which matches the mystery we find in the universe. This matching of mysteries is exactly what we would expect if a Trinitarian God created our universe.

## **Conclusion**

In the course of this paper we have set forth a model of Trinitarian Mysterianism, rehearsed the problem of the One and the Many, and then argued that the unity and diversity which is so problematic without God, actually evinces the finger prints of our Triune God. If our arguments hold, Crisp's Chastened Trinitarian Mysterianism uniquely answers the *de jure*

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<sup>69</sup> RD, 2.435-6.

objection against the doctrine of the Trinity and the coupling of Van Til's Equal Ultimacy with Bavinck's Organic Motif serve to go a long way in answering the *de facto* objection to the doctrine of the Trinity, which provides positive evidence for the existence of the mysterious Trinitarian God of Scripture.

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