The Nature of Monotheism
A Philosophical Explication

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Abstract This article develops a philosophical explication of monotheism through fundamentality, using Rudolf Carnap's method of explication and Karen Bennett's concept of 'building-fundamentality.' By examining how contemporary philosophers and theologians have struggled with defining monotheism in light of Second Temple Judaism's complex theology, this article argues that understanding monotheism as the belief in one fundamental deity provides a more philosophically robust framework than numerical definitions. This framework helps reconcile divine plurality in Jewish theology while offering new perspectives on polytheistic traditions and interfaith debates, thus contributing to broader discussions in the philosophy of religion and theology.

Keywords Bennett, Karen; Carnap, Rudolf; monotheism; Second Temple Judaism.

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1. INTRODUCTION

According to the common religious belief, the term 'monotheism' has a specifically numerical focus. Most of the major world religions either incorporate the notion of monotheism into their belief system (such as Christianity, Judaism, Islam and Sikhism) or, at least, define their own form of theism or non-theistic belief in light of this notion (such as that of Hinduism and Buddhism). Now, as expressed by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the term 'monotheism' is to be defined as follows:

(1) (Monotheism) The belief that there is only one 'god.'

The notion of monotheism finds its etymological roots in the seventeenth-century works of the Cambridge Platonists (Macdonald 2003). In their writings, the Platonists contested that the semantic and intellectual context of the term demonstrated that the antonym of 'monotheism' was in fact 'atheism,' rather than the more commonly entertained 'polytheism' (MacDonald 2003). At its root, a 'monotheist' was thus an individual who believed that "there was a 'god' with a certain nature," rather than someone who believed that "there was only one spiritual entity that could or should be named 'God'." However, this more accurate understanding of the term has unfortunately been neglected in contemporary discourse. Instead, the contemporary position is now focused on the term as encountered within later Enlightenment and deistic thought, with the primary use of the word there being that of providing a framework or matrix to assess the truth value of a religion within a European context. Specifically, it finds its origins in the work of Henry More (Smith 2013). 'Monotheism,' as a term applied to Enlightenment and deistic thinkers, thus served as an organising principle for the categorisation of religious concepts according to their intellectual claims, with priority given in the classification and evaluation of religions to the question of the number of 'gods.' The specific problem that this term presents us with reflects the assumption that, when further elucidated, it commits one to the following explication—which we may call 'Deity Monotheism' and can state succinctly as follows:[1]

(2) (Deity Monotheism) The belief that there is only one deity.

In a contemporary context, the definition of monotheism has been a central concern in the philosophy of religion, with scholars like Richard Swinburne

1. The terms 'deity' and 'divine being/person' will be used interchangeably throughout this text, without any difference in meaning.

(2016), Brian Leftow (2016) and Dale Tuggy (2017) largely adopting numerical definitions that focus on counting divine beings. This numerical approach, while intuitive, has also been defended by philosophers such as Swinburne (2016), who argues that monotheism must mean belief in exactly one divine being if it is to maintain conceptual clarity. Similarly, Leftow (2016) contends that any definition allowing for multiple divine beings undermines its core meaning. However, this contemporary construal in (2), focusing on the belief in a single deity and the denial of other divine beings, has led some historians, such as Peter Hayman (1991), Nathan MacDonald (2003) and Paula Fredriksen (2006) to argue that 'monotheism' is an inappropriate term for describing biblical teachings—as Fredriksen (2022) notes, ancient belief centred on loyalty to ancestral traditions rather than mental assent to propositions. These scholars point to explicit biblical passages that appear to acknowledge the real existence of other divine beings. For instance, when Deuteronomy 32:8–9 describes Yahweh allotting nations to other 'gods,' or when Psalm 82:1 depicts God standing in the divine council among other 'gods,' these texts seem to presuppose the actual existence of these beings rather than merely acknowledging that some people believe in them. As Michael Heiser (2008) argues, it would be nonsensical for biblical authors to describe Yahweh allocating nations to non-existent beings or judging among figments of the imagination. And so the evidence from the period surrounding the biblical texts seems to support the existence of other divine beings, which is incompatible with the contemporary definition of the term. Indeed, the concept of 'monotheism' in ancient Jewish and early Christian contexts is more nuanced than is commonly understood. That is to say, the notion of ancient Jewish monotheism—and thus not the current dictionary definition of the term—can be construed as follows:

(3) (Ancient Jewish Monotheism) A religious worldview that acknowledged the existence of multiple divine beings (אלוהים) while maintaining that Yahweh was uniquely supreme and exclusively worthy of worship due to his transcendent attributes as the sole creator and sovereign ruler of al. Reality, rather than a belief system focused on the numerical oneness of deity.

The Jewish scriptures themselves, as Fredriksen (2022) notes, attest to the existence of multiple divine beings alongside the 'god' of Israel. These passages are best understood not as rhetorical accommodations to pagan audiences, but as genuine theological statements about the structure

of divine reality. Passages like Exodus 12:12 ("On all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments"), Exodus 15:11 ("Who is like you among the gods"?), Exodus 18:12 ("Now I know that the Lord is greater than all gods"), Psalm 82:1 ("god stands in the divine council; in the midst of the gods he passes judgment"), Psalm 97:7 ("All the gods bow down to him"), Deuteronomy 32:43 ("Worship him, all you gods"), and Micah 4:5 ("All the peoples walk, each in the name of its god; but we will walk in the name of the Lord, our god forever and ever") acknowledge the presence of other 'gods,' even as they affirm the supremacy of the Jewish 'god.' The evidence for genuine divine plurality becomes even clearer when we examine how ancient Jewish and early Christian authors engaged with these ideas. Philo, a prolific philosopher and exegete, seamlessly incorporates Hellenistic ideas into his interpretations of Jewish scripture. In his cosmological treatises, he speaks of the stars as "visible gods," acknowledging their divine status within a hierarchical framework that places the Jewish 'god' at the apex. The apostle Paul, whose epistles constitute the earliest surviving Christian writings, also grapples with the reality of multiple divine beings. As Fredriksen (2022) notes, throughout his letters Paul frequently acknowledges the existence and influence of pagan 'gods,' presenting them as formidable spiritual powers that Christ must ultimately conquer. For example, Paul speaks of the "god of this age" (2 Corinthians 4:4), "principalities," "powers," "the rulers of the darkness of this age," and "spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 6:12) that oppose him and the gospel. The religious sensibilities of the ancient world, as noted by Fredriksen (2022) and as reflected in the thought of figures like Philo, Herod and Paul, were characterised by a conception of divinity as a spectrum rather than a binary. Other scholars who reject this evolutionary paradigm tend to assume that passages evincing divine plurality are actually speaking of human beings, or that the other 'gods' are merely idols.

Now, Heiser (2008) argues that the passages in Deuteronomy 4 and 32 that affirm the existence of other 'gods' must be contextualised in light of the Most High's dealings with the Gentile nations and the 'gods' he appointed to govern them. It would be nonsensical to conclude that Deut 4:19–20 and 32:8–9 show Yahweh giving the nations up to the governance of non-existent beings. The writer is not suggesting that Yahweh allotted non-existent beings to the nations so as to explain why the nations outside Israel worship such non-existent beings. The implication is that the declarations of Deut 4:35, 39 and 32:12, 39 are best understood as reflecting a worldview that accepted the reality of other 'gods,' along with Yahweh's utter uniqueness among them, not a worldview that denied the existence

of lesser *myhla*. To further understand this nuanced perspective, we turn to the historical conceptualisation of monotheism within Second Temple Jewish belief, best exemplified by the use of the term אלוהים (*Elohim*; 'god' or 'gods'). One of the primary usages of אלוהים in the Hebrew texts that require explanation is that of Psalm 82:1, which states: "'god' [אלוהים] stands in the divine council; in the midst of the 'gods' [אלוהים] he passes judgment." According to Heiser (2008), the first אלוהים clearly refers to a singular entity ('god') due to subject-verb agreement. However, Heiser (2008) notes that the second אלוהים is plural, since 'god' cannot be said to be standing in the midst of a (singular) 'god' or himself. Furthermore, another interpretation of אלוהים within the ancient Jewish and Second Temple Jewish worldviews involves construing it as a 'place of residence' term, as Heiser (2008) suggests. In this context, אלוהים does not ascribe a specific set of attributes to its referent, but simply identifies the proper domain of reality of the referent. As Heiser (2008) notes, all אלוהים are members of the unseen spiritual world, which is their place of residence. In that realm there is ranking, hierarchy and differentiation of attributes. Moreover, as Hurtado (2004) highlights, the ancient Jewish religious outlook constituted a distinctive version of the commonly attested belief structure at the time—a 'high god' who presided over other deities (Hurtado 2004, 129). While the ancient Jewish view shares similarities with its broader religious environment, a distinctive factor, as Hurtado (2004) points out, was their concern for 'god's' supremacy and uniqueness. The ancient Jews upheld this with an intensity and solidarity that seemed to surpass anything previously known in the Greco-Roman world, according to Hurtado (2005, 130). Within ancient Jewish belief, Yahweh, as אלוהים, was not held to be one among equals, but rather 'species-unique,' in that He was incomparable and unique in terms of His attributes, as noted by Heiser (2008).

This concept of 'species-uniqueness' can be further understood through Bauckham's (2008) exploration of 'transcendent uniqueness' or 'divine identity.' The latter holds that, for the monotheism of Second Temple Judaism, God is identified by features in two categories: (a) his relationship to Israel and (b) his relation to reality. Category (a) includes (a1) God having the unique name 'Yahweh' and (a2) Yahweh bringing Israel out of Egypt, emphasizing his covenantal relationship. However, the Jews focused more on category (b) to distinguish Yahweh's uniqueness relative to all of reality. This included (b1) Yahweh as sole creator, (b2) Yahweh as sovereign ruler, and (b3) Yahweh as the only being worthy of worship. That is, firstly, with respect to (b1), God is the sole creator of all things: He creates all things outside of Himself and is seen as the sole actor in His creative activity

(Isaiah 44:23–24). It is God alone who brought all other beings into reality, without assistance or through any intermediary agent. God alone is the creator of all things, and no other being takes part in this activity (Bauckham 2008). Secondly, where (b2) is concerned, God is the sole sovereign ruler over all things. All other things, including beings worshipped as 'gods' by non-Jews, are subject to Him in that He reigns supreme over all things outside of Himself (Bauckham 2008). All reality, outside of God, is thus in 'strict' subordination, as serving Him. There are no co-rulers with God. Lastly, when it comes to (b3), God is the only being worthy of worship, which involves recognising that worship was the appropriate response to a being who had the unique identifying attributes of (b1) and (b2). Thus, as God is the sole being who possesses these attributes, He is the only being worthy of worship. This prescription to worship God alone is thus grounded upon an acknowledgement of God's transcendent uniqueness and identity as sole creator and ruler (i.e. [b1] and [b2]) (Bauckham, 2008). God's unique identity, and the exclusive worship of him, were correlated with, and reinforced by, each other. Thus, in answer to the question of why the Jews would not worship any other being than "the one God," the simple answer was that they were created by Him and are subject to Him, with any good that comes to them ultimately finding its source in God. These features, according to Bauckham (2008), establish a clear and absolute distinction between God and all else in reality. They enabled ancient Jewish believers to define the uniqueness of God, marking Him out from all of reality, as Bauckham (2008) suggests. This means that, based on these criteria, all other beings, even the אלוהים, are His creatures and subjects (Bauckham 2008). The widely attested position of Second Temple monotheistic belief is thus grounded upon the expression of God's utter uniqueness—His 'species uniqueness' and 'transcendent uniqueness'—rather than a negation or denial of the existence of other divine beings, as noted by Heiser (2012, 6). As Heiser (2008) explains, an entity that is 'species-unique' possesses at least one attribute not shared by any other member of the species. In other words, a species-unique being need not be unique in every attribute, but must be set apart in ways that are completely unique (Heiser 2012, 30). The uniqueness of Yahweh among the existing אלוהים, according to Heiser (2008, 29), was thus an incontestable position within ancient Jewish theology, Taking this into account, we see that the religious outlook of the ancient Jews was indeed 'strict' or 'exclusivist.' However, this did not negate the existence of any other divine agents beyond the god of Israel. Instead, the 'strict' monotheistic focus was on the uniqueness of God rather than being a numerical focus, as noted by Wright (1992, 259). For the latter,

along with Heiser and Hurtado, the monotheism of the Second Temple period is not associated with any type of numerical or quantitative oneness, but is solely a qualitative concept focused on the difference between the unique features of Israel's God and all other types of reality. Israel's God is one because of His uniqueness.

Given the evidence, Fredriksen and others have called for the term's "mandatory retirement." However, along with individuals such as Heiser (2008) and Hurtado (2004), I would argue that this is not necessary. The problem with the term arises from the assumption that when it is further elucidated one is committed to an explication of 'monotheism' as the belief in a single deity. Instead, I propose an alternative explication of the term, which we can call 'Fundamentality Monotheism.' This specific explication is compatible with the beliefs and practices evident in the biblical texts and the surrounding period—as it acknowledges the existence of a single 'fundamental' deity while allowing for the presence of subordinate divine beings. Hence, by adopting this more nuanced definition of 'monotheism,' which emphasises the belief in a single fundamental deity rather than the exclusion of all other divine entities, we can reconcile the concept with the religious landscape of the biblical period—and other religious periods as well—and avoid the need to retire the term altogether.

The central focus of this article will thus be to advance an alternative conception of monotheism, namely Fundamentality Monotheism, which reconciles the acknowledgement of a deity with the existence of subordinate divine beings. By employing Rudolf Carnap's method of explication, this approach refines the concept of monotheism so that it becomes "the belief in a single fundamental deity" and lays the ground for testing it against Carnap's criteria of adequacy—similarity, exactness, fruitfulness and simplicity—to ensure a precise and theoretically fruitful definition. To support this explication, there will be an analysis of it in light of the historical and textual evidence from biblical and Second Temple Jewish periods introduced above. Ultimately, it will be shown—once an important objection related to the notion of polytheism, and a certain interfaith implication, have been elucidated—that this explication of the notion of monotheism is indeed fruitful, and so should be adopted as the correct definition of this important theological term.

As regards the structure of the remainder of the article, Section 2 ("Building-Fundamentality") explores fundamentality in divine entities through Bennett's framework. Section 3 ("The Method of Explication") then details Carnap's method of explication and its criteria. Section 4 ("Defining 'God'") articulates how 'god' can be understood as a fundamental deity, Section 5

("Explicating Monotheism") subsequently applies Carnap's method with a view to developing Fundamentality Monotheism. Section 6 ("The Pantheon Objection") addresses challenges from polytheistic traditions, and Section 7 ("Interfaith Implications of Explication") explores implications for debates over Trinitarianism and Unitarianism. Finally, the concluding section ("Conclusion") will summarise the findings of the article.

2. Building-Fundamentality

In contemporary metaphysics, the notion of fundamentality is used in reference to an entity (or entities) that is (or are) basic, primitive or rock-bottom in the hierarchical structure of reality. Karen Bennett (2017) defines it as follows:

(4) (Fundamentality) x is fundamental if it is independent (i.e. unbuilt/ungrounded) and complete (i.e. the builder/ground of everything else).

Two central aspects of the notion of fundamentality, for Bennett (2017), are those of 'independence' and 'completeness' (with the former being more central to the notion than the latter), which can be construed succinctly as follows:

(5) (Independence) x is independent if nothing builds x.

(6) (Completeness) The set of the xxs is (or the xxs plurally are, or a non-set-like x is) complete at a world w just in case its members build everything else at w.

These concepts, in Bennett's (2017) thought, are intimately tied to the notion of 'building,' which is a technical term encompassing various relations, such as composition, constitution, set-formation, realization, micro-based determination, grounding, and causation. Building relations form a unified family, characterized by three essential conditions: directedness (antisymmetric, irreflexive, asymmetric), necessitation (builders necessitate what they build), and generation (built entities exist in virtue of their builders). Within this building-fundamentality framework there is, according to Bennett (2017), a deflationist view of fundamentality, where fundamentality facts are simply building facts. This perspective reflects the familiar phrase 'unexplained explainers,' with independence representing the 'unexplained' aspect and completeness embodying the 'explainers' aspect.

Now, among the various building relations, the specific relation of 'grounding' holds a special place. And so, following Jonathan Schaffer (2016), we can construe the nature of this relation as follows:

(7) (Grounding) An asymmetric, necessitating dependence relation that links the more fundamental entities to the less fundamental entities, and thus backs a synchronic metaphysical explanation for the existence and nature of an entity in virtue of the existence and nature of another, more fundamental entity.

Grounding thus serves to impose a hierarchical structure on reality, connecting more fundamental entities to less fundamental ones. It fulfils two crucial roles: explanatory and generative. In its explanatory capacity, grounding provides the basis for synchronic metaphysical explanations of less fundamental entities in terms of more fundamental ones—that is, grounding is a relation that 'backs' a synchronic metaphysical explanation (e.g. an H_2O molecule exists at a particular time in virtue of two H atoms and one O atom, or the singleton set Socrates exists *at a particular time* in virtue of the existence of Socrates), in the same manner that the relation of causation 'backs' the diachronic causal explanation of the existence of an entity or event (e.g., a radioactive isotope of carbon-14 exists at t_2 in virtue of the decay of a neutron into a proton in a nitrogen-14 atom at t_1, through weak nuclear interaction). Meanwhile, its 'generative' role is reflected in its 'super-internal' nature, where the existence and intrinsic nature of one relatum ensure both the obtaining of the relation and the existence and nature of the other relatum. Moreover, this conception of grounding leads to its identification with metaphysical causation, which is distinct from but related to nomological causation. Both are species of the broader genus 'causation,' differentiated by how the causal sufficiency relation is mediated by principles of grounding for metaphysical causation, and by laws of nature for nomological causation. Given this understanding of grounding, we can now further refine our notion of fundamentality (and its two aspects) as follows:

(8) (Fundamentality$_G$) x is fundamental if x is independent$_G$ and complete$_G$.
(9) (Independence$_G$) x is independent if nothing grounds x.
(10) (Completeness$_G$) The set of the xxs is (or the xxs plurally are, or a non-set-like x is) complete at a world w just in case its members ground everything else at w.

In this framework, an entity is deemed fundamental if it is ungrounded and belongs to a set of entities that collectively ground everything else in a given world. Conversely, an entity is derivative (non-fundamental) if it is grounded by something else or is not part of such a world-grounding set. In further rendering precise this connection between fundamentality and grounding, we can apply the various fundamentality principles within

this framework, with the result that the nature of a fundamental entity is as follows:[2]

Table 1. Application of Fundamentality Principles

Grounding Principles	Independent$_{G}$ (Ungrounded)	Complete$_{G}$ (Ground)
Directed	The deity does not rank below any other entity in the hierarchical structure of reality.	The deity ranks higher than any other entity in the hierarchical structure of reality within the specific world in which it exists.
Necessitating	The existence of any other entity does not necessitate the existence of the deity.	The deity's existence necessitates the existence of every other entity within the specific world in which it exists.
Generative	The deity's existence and intrinsic nature are not fixed by the existence and intrinsic nature of any other entity.	The deity's existence and intrinsic nature fixes the existence and intrinsic nature of every other entity within the specific world in which it exists.
Explanatory	The deity's existence, at a specific time, is not explained by the existence of any other entity.	The deity's existence, at a specific time, explains the existence of all other entities within the specific world in which it exists.
Causal	The deity is not a grounded effect of any other entity.	The deity is the generator of all other entities that are grounded effects, within the specific world in which it exists.

A fundamental entity is thus one that is not an output of a grounding relation; rather, it ultimately serves as the ground of everything else. For a fundamental entity, nothing presses upwards on it; instead, it serves the role of pressing upwards on all other (non-fundamental) entities—it is a basic feature of the hierarchical structure of reality (Bennett 2017, 111). We thus have a clear, and indexed (i.e., relativisation to a specific building relation) point-by-point rendering in precise terms of the notion of fundamentality, with a clarification here of how the building-relation of grounding fits neatly into this picture. Now that we have unpacked the nature of fundamentality and its relationship to grounding, we can apply this

2. Note that the tables starting on this page serve a clarificatory function, summarizing the grounding principles already discussed. Readers familiar with these concepts may wish to skip these summaries.

concept in order to elucidate the term 'god,' where doing so will furnish a foundation for our explicative activity.

3. The Method of Explication

The method of explication as developed by Rudolf Carnap (1962) plays a pivotal role in both analytical philosophy and the philosophy of science, offering a systematic approach to refining and replacing inexact or vague concepts with more precise and useful ones within theoretical frameworks. We can state the central aspect of explication as follows:

(11) (Explication) A method that systematically refines and replaces inexact or vague concepts (the *explicandum*) with more precise and useful concepts (the *explicatum*) within a theoretical framework, guided by the criteria of similarity, exactness, fruitfulness, and simplicity.

This specific method of explication, according to Carnap (1962), is a two-stage process aimed at enhancing conceptual clarity and theoretical utility. The first stage focuses on the *explicandum*—the inexact or vague concept that requires refinement. Since the explicandum, as noted by Carnap, is inherently inexact, it cannot be precisely defined, and thus, instead, is characterized informally, often through examples that illustrate where the concept clearly applies or does not apply. The second stage introduces the *explicatum*—a new, more exact concept intended to replace the explicandum within a particular theoretical context. This, as he notes, involves explicitly specifying rules for using the explicatum, ideally through a precise definition—though there is an allowance for less strict methods of concept introduction when necessary. An example of this method at work is his example of the everyday concept of 'fish' (the *explicandum*), which suffices for general purposes but falls short when it comes to biological classification. Thus, in following the explicative method noted above, this concept is replaced in biology by 'piscis' (the *explicatum*), defined as 'cold-blooded aquatic vertebrate.' This shift allows for more precise classification and the formulation of biological laws, even though it may exclude creatures commonly considered fish in everyday language, such as whales. Importantly, however, explication is not solely limited to scientific contexts, but is also prevalent in philosophy. That is, philosophers frequently engage in explication when refining concepts such as 'truth,' 'knowledge,' or 'blame.' For instance, Kant (1998) explicates 'opinion,' 'belief,' and 'knowledge' by distinguishing them based on subjective and objective sufficiency. Similarly, Scanlon (2008) explicates 'blameworthy' and 'blame' in moral philosophy

by articulating their relation to an agent's attitudes and the impairment of relationships.

When seeking to understand the nature of explication, the adequacy of the notion is central, and this centres on four main criteria: *similarity*, *exactness*, *fruitfulness* and *simplicity*. The first criterion, similarity, requires that the *explicatum* bear a certain resemblance to the explicandum, allowing it to be used in place of the explicandum in relevant contexts. However, according to Carnap's thinking there can be considerable differences between the two concepts. The second criterion, exactness, stipulates that the explicatum be more exact than the explicandum. This involves formulating explicit rules for using the explicatum, thus eliminating ambiguity and reducing vagueness. Moreover, exactness also encompasses the elimination of contradictions and paradoxes. The third criterion, fruitfulness, is perhaps the most crucial, according to Carnap: an explicatum should be useful for the formulation of universal statements, laws, or generalizations within the target theory. For instance, the concept of 'piscis' allows biologists to formulate laws about aquatic vertebrates, connecting the concept to other biological concepts and observed facts. The fourth and final, criterion, simplicity, serves as a secondary consideration, which is employed, as he notes, when multiple explicata satisfy the other criteria to a similar degree. Moreover, this criterion refers to the simplicity of the explicatum's definition and the simplicity of the laws that include the explicatum.

Before we proceed further, the decision to employ Carnap's method of explication requires justification, especially given the alternative approaches to conceptual analysis available in contemporary philosophy. Carnap's method is chosen here not as an authoritative standard that all must accept, but as a particularly useful tool for this specific task. The method provides systematic criteria for evaluating conceptual refinements, which is especially valuable when attempting to develop a definition that must navigate between historical accuracy, theological sensitivity, and philosophical rigor. Moreover, Carnap's emphasis on fruitfulness—the ability of a concept to generate new insights and resolve existing puzzles—aligns well with our goal of developing a definition of monotheism that can illuminate rather than obscure the complex theological landscape of ancient and contemporary religious traditions. Now that we have unpacked the nature of the method of explication, it will be important to provide a working definition for the notion of a 'god,' where this will fulfil a central role in our explicative activity.

4. Defining 'God'

In seeking to conceptualize the term 'god' that stands at the centre of our explication process—a term laden with diverse cultural, philosophical and theological significance throughout human history and across different belief systems—we can offer the following definition:

(12) (God) x is a "god" *iff* (i) x is a deity (ii) x is fundamental.

In the definition of the term 'god' featured in (2), this term is used as a *referring expression*—that is, as a 'name' or 'title' for a particular type of entity—namely, one that is a deity and one that is fundamental—and, therefore, we can call the usage of this term its 'nominal' sense. Hence, to be a 'god,' a particular entity must possess these two features—i.e. be a fundamental deity—where this means that any entity that lacks either of these features, (e.g., by being a deity but lacking fundamentality) would not be a 'god.' Now, at a general level, a deity is characterised by attributes that exceed natural limitations, placing it in the category of supernatural beings. These attributes include power, knowledge, and other qualities that surpass what is achievable through natural means alone. The supernatural attributes of a deity typically encompass enhanced power to influence the world, knowledge beyond human comprehension, and a presence not constrained by physical limitations. These qualities, while significantly greater than those found in nature, are not necessarily infinite or maximal. Hence, there is a spectrum as regards the degree to which a deity's attributes exceed natural limitations. At one end are deities whose powers, while supernatural, have clear bounds. At the other extreme lie omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent divine beings whose attributes are considered absolutely unlimited. Most conceptions of deities fall somewhere between these two poles, ascribing to the 'god' in question powers that vastly surpass the natural world, but still may be subject to some constraints. Examples of constrained deities include Greek gods like Zeus who, while immensely powerful, is not omnipotent. The god of classical theism, in contrast, is considered to have unlimited power, knowledge and presence. The specific supernatural attributes ascribed to a deity thus shape its role and influence within a given religious tradition, and for this reason, understanding these qualities will be key to grasping the nature and significance of a particular conception of divinity. Now, given this construal of the nature of a deity, we can turn our attention to the second feature that an entity must possess to be a 'god'—namely, that of fundamentality.

One could raise the question, at this point, of why deities should be construed as supernatural entities—that is, entities possessing attributes that exceed natural limitations. This characterization emerges from cross-cultural studies of religious concepts, where deities are consistently distinguished from natural entities by their possession of powers, knowledge, or modes of existence that transcend what is achievable through natural processes alone. As Pascal Boyer (2001) and Justin Barrett (2004) have demonstrated in their cognitive scientific research into religion, the concept of a deity invariably involves some violation or transcendence of ordinary natural categories and limitations. This supernatural dimension is not an arbitrary addition, but reflects how religious traditions themselves understand and characterize their deities.

As was previously noted, fundamentality is best construed in terms of an entity's being independent and complete. So, if a deity is to be fundamental, it must itself be independent and complete. More specifically, the deity will be an 'unexplained explainer,' in that it will be on the one hand independent, which is to say unbuilt, and on the other complete, which is to say that it will be a member of a set of entities at a world whose members build everything else. However, as was noted above, the notions of independence and completeness are ambiguous as they stand. In that respect, we must index each of these notions to particular building-relations. Thus, focusing on the specific building-relation of grounding, the deity's being independent is reducible to its being ungrounded, and its being complete is reducible to its being a member of a set of entities at a world whose members ground everything else. In short, the deity is the ungrounded ground of everything else. Hence, the deity, as a fundamental entity, is ontologically prior to all other things in the hierarchical structure of reality. It is independent of all things and exists as the complete entity within this structure, due to its being ungrounded (i.e. unbuilt) and fulfilling the role of grounding (i.e. building) all other features of reality. The deity is thus fundamental by virtue of not being the output of any grounding relation, in that nothing 'presses upwards' on it: rather, it presses upwards on all other (non-fundamental) entities. We can thus further elucidate the nature of the deity's role as a fundamental entity within reality by applying the grounding principles to this specific case as well:

Table 2. Application of Fundamentality Principles

Grounding Principles	Independent_{G} (Ungrounded)	The deity ranks higher than any other entity in the hierarchical structure of reality within the specific world in which it exists.
Directed	The deity does not rank below any other entity in the hierarchical structure of reality.	The deity's existence necessitates the existence of every other entity within the specific world in which it exists.
Necessitating	The existence of any other entity does not necessitate the existence of the deity.	The deity's existence and intrinsic nature fixes the existence and intrinsic nature of every other entity within the specific world in which it exists.
Generative	The deity's existence and intrinsic nature are not fixed by the existence and intrinsic nature of any other entity.	The deity's existence, at a specific time, explains the existence of all other entities within the specific world in which it exists.
Explanatory	The deity's existence, at a specific time, is not explained by the existence of any other entity.	The deity is the generator of all other entities that are grounded effects, within the specific world in which it exists.
Causal	The deity is not a grounded effect of any other entity.	The deity ranks higher than any other entity in the hierarchical structure of reality within the specific world in which it exists.

Grounding, conceived as a relation of 'directed dependence,' plays the needed role of a necessary explanation-backing link that stems from the deity to all other entities, and is mediated by the principles of grounding. All other entities are dependent for their existence upon the (eternal and necessitating) action of this specific deity. Hence, they do not exist as independent entities, but are grounded (or built) entities. Thus, as all other entities are the less fundamental result within this grounding relationship, they are subordinate to the deity. Therefore, there is a distinct ordering and distinction of status within reality, wherein the deity, as an independent and complete entity (i.e. the ungrounded ground of everything else), is fundamental, and all other entities, being dependent and non-complete (i.e. grounded entities that are not the ground of everything else), are derivative and non-fundamental. We can now restate our definition of 'god' in a more precisely rendered form as follows:

(13) (God*) x is a god *iff* (i) x is a deity (i.e. it possesses power, knowledge, freedom, goodness, etc., that exceed natural limitations), and (ii) x is fundamental (i.e. is independent (ungrounded) and complete (i.e. is in a set whose members are the ground of everything else)).

There is a hierarchical structure within reality, in that we have a case of there being one entity, the deity, which is fundamental and undergirds everything else, with the grounding relation connecting all other entities to this deity, which stands at a higher level in the structure of reality. Thus, all other entities (i.e. the undergirded entities) are linked by the grounding relation as less fundamental 'output,' to a more fundamental 'input' (i.e. undergirding entity) that is 'god': i.e. a fundamental deity. Within this hierarchical structure, as noted previously, 'god' is thus the fundamental and most 'basic' entity (or, at least, one such entity) in all of reality, and serves as the ultimate (synchronically metaphysical) explanation for the nature and/or existence of all else in reality. ConverselyYet, all other purported deities are not '"ggods'" by notif they either are being not a deity or lacking fundamentality, and so any other deity isare not "god" rightly called referred to as "'ggods" ' by throughif, as them being entities, that they lack this fundamentality. Now that we have defined the term 'god,' we can turn our attention to explicating our central notion, which is that of monotheism.

5. Explicating Monotheism

As was noted earlier, the method of explication, as developed by Carnap, provides a systematic approach to refining and replacing inexact or vague concepts with more precise and useful ones within theoretical frameworks. Hence, in the context of exploring the concept of monotheism, the explicative process can be applied to clarify the meaning of 'god' and, consequently, the belief in one god. This can be achieved, according to what we are proposing, by explicating the term 'god' as referring to a fundamental deity—such that the concept of monotheism is given a more precise and theoretically fruitful definition. We can thus succinctly state our explication of monotheism as Fundamentality Monotheism as follows:

(14) (Fundamentality Monotheism) The belief that there is only one 'god' $=_{ex.}$ The belief that there is only one fundamental deity.

The first step in the explicative process is to identify the explicandum—which, in this case, is the concept 'god' as understood in the context of monotheism. Traditionally, monotheism is defined as the belief in one

god, but the term 'god' itself is often left inexact or vague. This ambiguity can lead to confusion and hinder the development of a robust theoretical framework for understanding the nature of god and the implications of monotheistic belief. To address this issue, the explication introduces the explicatum, which is the refined and more precise concept of 'god' as a 'fundamental deity.' This new definition is intended to replace the explicandum within the specific theoretical context of monotheism. So, by explicitly specifying the characteristics of a fundamental deity, the explicatum provides a clearer and more exact understanding of what it means to answer to the term 'god.' That is, the explicatum defines 'god' as an entity that possesses two essential features, 'fundamentality' and 'divinity', which are attributes that exceed natural limitations. These attributes include power, knowledge and other qualities that surpass what is achievable through natural means alone, placing the deity in the category of supernatural beings. Now, it is important to note that in some religious traditions, the god of monotheism is conceived as a deity that lacks all limitations, thus possessing attributes such as power, knowledge and goodness in an absolute sense—i.e. maximal power, knowledge and goodness. However, the explication of 'god' as a fundamental deity does not necessarily entail these maximal attributes, which thus allows for a more inclusive understanding of divinity that can accommodate a spectrum of supernatural qualities.

On the other hand, fundamentality is construed as an entity's—which in this context means a deity's—being independent and complete. Independence means that the deity is unbuilt or ungrounded, while completeness signifies that the deity is a member of a set of entities at a world whose members build everything else. Hence, by incorporating these two features into the definition of 'god,' the explication successfully captures the essential characteristics that distinguish a monotheistic god from other entities. What this means is that this explicatum emphasises the unique ontological status of 'god' as a fundamental ground of everything else in reality.

Moreover, the explication also satisfies Carnap's (1956) criteria for adequacy to a sufficient degree. Firstly, it bears a significant similarity to the explicandum, as it maintains the core idea of 'god' as a deity while providing a more precise understanding of what this entails. This similarity thus allows the explicatum to be used in place of the explicandum in relevant contexts, such as theological and philosophical discussions of monotheism. Secondly, the explicatum is more exact than the explicandum, as it eliminates ambiguity and reduces vagueness by explicitly specifying the rules for using the term 'god.' The incorporation of supernatural attributes and the principles of fundamentality (or grounding) provide a clear

framework for understanding the nature of 'god' and its relation to other entities in reality. Hence, this increased exactness enables clearer decisions about the applicability of the concept in various cases, and promotes consistency in respect of its use. Thirdly, the explicatum is relatively simple, as it introduces a concise definition of 'god' that captures the essential features without unnecessary complexity. The use of supernatural attributes and the notion of fundamentality provide a straightforward and intuitive framework for understanding the nature of 'god,' thus making the explicatum accessible and easy to employ in relevant contexts. Fourthly, the explicatum is fruitful, as it enables the formulation of universal statements, laws, or generalizations within the target theory of monotheism. That is, by defining 'god' as a fundamental deity, the explication provides a robust foundation for exploring the implications of monotheistic belief and its relation to other philosophical and theological concepts. The explicatum's emphasis on 'god's' ontological priority and role as the ground of all other entities opens up new avenues of theoretical development and forms of explanatory power.

We can now understand the fruitfulness of the explication of monotheism (as the belief in one fundamental deity) by applying it within the context of ancient Jewish monotheism: the notion of fundamentality featured in the explication emerges as the key characteristic that captures the essential features of the ancient Jewish understanding of God, including His uniqueness and ontological priority, while still accommodating the complex theological landscape of Second Temple Judaism. More specifically, the explication's emphasis on the fundamentality of 'god' aligns with the ancient Jewish understanding of Yahweh as the sole creator and sovereign ruler of all things: by identifying Yahweh as the fundamental ground of all reality, it establishes His ontological priority and unique status as the creator and sustainer of all things, including other divine beings. In consequence, this understanding is consistent with the ancient Jewish belief in Yahweh as the 'high god' who presides over a court of heavenly beings. In addition to this, the explication's emphasis on the fundamentality of 'god' provides a crucial basis for understanding why Yahweh was considered the only being worthy of worship within the ancient Jewish monotheistic framework. This is due to the fact that while the concept of deity alone may not necessarily preclude the existence of other divine beings, the notion of fundamentality establishes Yahweh as the unique and *unrivalled* ground of all reality. What this means is that, as the fundamental entity upon which all other beings, including divine ones, depend for their existence, Yahweh alone is worthy of exclusive devotion and worship. Hence, the explication's identification

of 'god' with an independent and complete entity, ungrounded and serving as the ground of everything else, underscores the ontological and devotional primacy of Yahweh within the ancient Jewish worldview. And so this understanding aligns with the distinctive feature of ancient Jewish monotheism, which reserved worship exclusively for Yahweh, recognising Him as the sole creator and sustainer of all things.

Now, the fruitfulness of this explication lies in its ability to highlight the distinctive features of ancient Jewish monotheism within the broader religious environment of the ancient world. While the concept of a 'high god' presiding over other deities was common in ancient Near Eastern religions, the ancient Jewish understanding of Yahweh's uniqueness and the exclusive devotion owed to Him sets their monotheistic belief apart. The explication's emphasis on 'god' as a fundamental deity captures this distinctiveness by underlining the ontological and devotional primacy of Yahweh within the ancient Jewish worldview. Moreover, the explication proves fruitful in providing a framework for understanding the development of early Christian thought, which emerged from Second Temple Judaism. The point here is that the early Christian understanding of Jesus as a divine figure alongside the god of Israel can be better understood within the context of ancient Jewish monotheism, which acknowledged the existence of divine beings subordinate to Yahweh. The explication's recognition of a fundamental deity among other divine beings provides a conceptual framework for exploring the early Christian understanding of the relationship between God the Father and Jesus Christ. Thus, the explication of monotheism as the belief in one fundamental deity proves to be highly fruitful when applied to the context of ancient Jewish monotheism. It captures the essential features of the ancient Jewish understanding of God, including His (species or transcendent) uniqueness, grounded upon His fundamentality, while accommodating the complex theological landscape of Second Temple Judaism. The explication provides a conceptual framework for understanding the relationship between Yahweh and other divine beings, as well as the distinctive features of ancient Jewish monotheism within the broader religious environment of the ancient world.

Even so, despite the fruitfulness (and thus the overall adequacy, in the sense of similarity, exactness, simplicity and fruitfulness) of the proposed explication of monotheism as the belief in one fundamental deity, it does face a potential challenge when considering its applicability to polytheistic religious traditions. This challenge questions the fruitfulness of the explication in capturing the concept of divinity as understood within the context of ancient Greek religion and mythology; we can term this objection the 'Pantheon Objection.'

6. The Pantheon Objection

The Pantheon Objection contends that the proposed explication of monotheism in terms of Fundamentality Monotheism fails to be adequately fruitful due to its inability to capture the concept of divinity as understood within the context of polytheistic religions, particularly as exemplified by the Greek pantheon. This objection deserves serious consideration, as it tests whether our definition can accommodate the full range of religious phenomena it purports to explain. We can state this objection succinctly as follows:

(15) (Pantheon Objection) Defining 'god' in terms of fundamentality (being an independent ground of reality) fails because it cannot properly account for polytheistic deities, such as those in the Greek pantheon, who were considered true 'gods' despite not being fundamental in this sense.

This objection arises from the recognition that the explicatum of 'god' as a fundamental deity, while potentially useful for clarifying monotheistic belief, does not align with the divine beings depicted in Greek mythology and worshipped in ancient Greek religion. Hence, the objection points out that if the concept of 'god' is defined as a being that is fundamental, then this definition should be applicable not only to monotheism but also to polytheism—that is, it should cover both of these forms of 'theism.' However, when this definition is applied to a paradigm case of polytheism, the Greek pantheon, it becomes apparent that the 'gods' worshipped by the ancient Greeks do not meet the criteria of fundamentality in the sense required by the explication—and thus, the explication provided is not truly fruitful.

We can see this more clearly from the following: according to Greek mythology, the Olympian 'gods' (traditionally consisting of Zeus (king of the 'gods,' and 'god' of the sky and thunder), Hera ('god' of marriage and family), Poseidon ('god' of the sea and earthquakes), Demeter ('god' of harvest and agriculture), Athena ('god' of wisdom and war strategy), Apollo ('god' of the sun, music, and prophecy), Artemis ('god' of the moon and hunting), Ares ('god' of war and bloodlust), Aphrodite ('god' of love and beauty), Hephaestus ('god' of fire and metalworking), Hermes ('god' of messengers and commerce), and Dionysus ('god' of wine and festivities)), while powerful and revered, are not eternal or uncreated beings. That is, the myths depict the 'gods' as coming into existence at a certain point in the history of the cosmos,[3] often through procreation or other means of generation.

3. See Graves (2017) for a further unpacking of this story.

Zeus, the ruler of the 'gods,' is himself the son of the Titans Cronus and Rhea, and he achieves his position of supremacy through a violent struggle against his father and the other Titans. This suggests that the Greek 'gods,' for all their might and majesty, are not fundamental in the sense of being independent grounds of all reality. Rather, they are part of a larger cosmic narrative in which they emerge as contingent beings within an already existing universe. And so, if the concept of 'god' proposed by the explication fails to capture the understanding of divine beings within a polytheistic context such as the one above, then it is indeed too narrow or restrictive to serve as a comprehensive and illuminating definition of what it means for an entity to be a 'god.' In that case, the fact that the Greek 'gods' were considered true deities worthy of worship and veneration, despite not being fundamental, suggests that the explication may be overlooking essential aspects of how the notion of a 'god' was conceptualised and experienced in ancient religious traditions.

In light of these considerations, one can indeed question the adequacy and scope of the notion of 'god' that features in the explication proposed above, and it thus appears to fail as a comprehensive account of what it means for an entity to be a 'god' across diverse religious and cultural contexts. Hence, the question now to be faced is whether one can indeed respond to the issues raised by the Pantheon Objection in a manner that would allow one to re-affirm the adequacy of the explication developed here. I believe that this objection can be addressed by re-considering the possibility of a parallel concept of *Fundamentality Polytheism*, which can be stated as follows:

(16) (Fundamentality Polytheism) The belief that that there are multiple "god"s $=_{ex.}$ The belief that there are multiple fundamental deities.

In the proposed explication of the notion of polytheism—the belief that there are multiple 'gods'—as corresponding to a belief that there are multiple fundamental deities, one can, in fact, understand that the Greek pantheon of 'gods,' as described in the mythological tradition, does fit with this particular explication, due to the fact that these 'gods' (and others like them) can indeed be considered fundamental in the metaphysical sense, even if they are not eternal or uncreated. That is to say, by distinguishing between the notions of causation and grounding, it is indeed possible to articulate a coherent model of Fundamentality Polytheism that captures the 'god-hood' of the Olympian 'gods' while avoiding the pitfalls of the original objection. Now, central to this line of response is the recognition that having

a cause for one's existence does not necessarily entail being grounded by another entity. Grounding, as was noted previously, is a *synchronic relation* that obtains at each moment that an entity exists—thus providing a metaphysical explanation for its continued existence and intrinsic nature. In contrast, causation is a diachronic relation that accounts for how an entity came to exist in the first place, but does not necessarily entail a persistent dependence on the causing entity. This distinction thus opens up the possibility that the Greek 'gods,' while having a causal origin as narrated in the myths, may nonetheless be ungrounded and thus fundamental according to the definition provided. The relevant point here is that those myths depict the Olympian 'gods' as being born or generated by other divine beings, as with Zeus's being the son of the Titans Cronus and Rhea. However, once the 'gods' come into existence, there is no indication in the mythological tradition that their continued existence or intrinsic nature is grounded by any other entity. That is, Zeus and the other Olympians appear to be self-sustaining and metaphysically independent, not requiring any external entity to ground their being at each moment—they possess their own power, agency and ontological stability, suggesting that they are not derivative or dependent in the sense of being grounded. And so, if that interpretation is granted, then the 'gods' can indeed be considered fundamental according to the construal of this notion developed above.

In support of this conclusion, we may observe that the mythological story of the "Binding of Zeus" provides compelling evidence for the independence and fundamentality of the Greek 'gods,' even in relation to Zeus, their king. In this story, Zeus was bound with hundred-knotted thongs by Hera, Poseidon, Apollo, and the other Olympians (except Hestia) while he slept, but was freed by the hundred-handed Briareus summoned by Thetis. As punishment, Zeus hung Hera from the sky with bracelets and anvils until the other 'gods' swore loyalty to him. Zeus then sent Poseidon and Apollo to build Troy as bond-servants, but pardoned the other conspirators, who had acted under duress.[4] Now, the fact that Hera, Poseidon, Apollo, and the other Olympians were able to conspire against Zeus, bind him, and threaten his rule suggests that their existence and power were *not entirely dependent on him.* That is, in the context of the metaphysical notion of grounding, this story demonstrates that the 'gods' were not synchronically grounded by Zeus at each and every moment of their existence, in that their willingness to overthrow Zeus and establish a new order on Olympus implies that they did not view their own existence as inextricably tied to

4. See (Graves 2017) again for a further unpacking of this story.

his. Instead, they were prepared to terminate Zeus's rule and, potentially, his existence, thus indicating that they did not consider themselves to be metaphysically dependent on him. Hence, the complex power dynamics and relationships among the 'gods' suggest that their roles and authorities were not fixed or absolute, and this is consistent with a model of independent and self-sustaining deities. Moreover, Zeus's need to resort to punishing and threatening the other 'gods' after being released, rather than simply reasserting his metaphysical supremacy, suggests that his authority, again, was not intrinsic or necessary to their existence. The specific punishments inflicted on Hera, Poseidon, and Apollo reveal the limits of Zeus's power and the resilience of the other 'gods,' therefore implying that they maintained a level of autonomy even in the face of his wrath. And so we can indeed affirm the possible possession of the first aspect of fundamentality by the Greek pantheon of 'gods'—namely, that of independence.

Furthermore, recent scholarship on Greek religion supports a more nuanced understanding of divine independence—one that aligns with our fundamentality framework presented here. Scholars such as Jenny Strauss Clay (1989), Ken Dowden (1992) and Jan Bremmer (1994) emphasize that the Greek gods, despite their mythological origins, function as autonomous powers within their respective domains. As Clay's analysis of Hesiod's *Theogony* demonstrates, once established in their roles the Olympian gods operate with genuine independence—they have their own wills, their own spheres of authority, and their own divine prerogatives that even Zeus must respect through negotiation and political manoeuvring rather than simple ontological dominance. The binding of Zeus narrative, carefully analysed by Timothy Gantz (1993) in his comprehensive study of Greek mythological traditions, provides compelling evidence for this independence. The very fact that the other Olympians could successfully conspire against and bind Zeus—even temporarily—demonstrates that their existence and power do not derive from him moment-to-moment. As Walter Burkert (1985) notes in his seminal work on Greek religion, the Greek gods are conceived as eternal and self-sustaining once they come into being. Their mythological births are aetiological narratives explaining their entry into the cosmos, not ongoing relationships of metaphysical dependence. The distinction between causal origin and synchronic grounding is crucial here: Hephaestus may have been born from Hera, but his continued existence as the god of metallurgy does not depend on her sustaining power. This understanding supports a model of plural fundamentality within Greek polytheism. Each deity can be understood as fundamental within their particular sphere—Poseidon with respect to the sea, Demeter with respect to agriculture, Apollo with

respect to prophecy and music. While Zeus holds political supremacy and can negotiate or even command other gods through his greater power, this represents a difference in degree of power rather than a difference in fundamental ontological status. When Zeus must persuade, threaten, or bargain with other deities (as he frequently does in Homer's epics), this reveals that he cannot simply will changes in their domains but must work within a system of independent divine powers. The cosmos requires all these fundamental deities working in concert, which is precisely why Greek religion involved cults directed towards multiple gods rather than exclusive worship of Zeus alone.

We can also affirm the possible possession of the second aspect of fundamentality—namely, that of completeness—in that while the 'gods' may not individually ground everything else in the cosmos, they can potentially form a set of entities that collectively ground all other elements of reality within their mythological world. That is, the 'gods' are consistently portrayed as the source and explanation for various natural phenomena, human affairs, and the overall order of the universe. They are the ultimate arbiters of fate, the dispensers of justice, and the powers behind the forces of nature. In this sense, the 'gods,' as a plurality, can be seen as complete, in virtue of fulfilling the role of grounding the existence and nature of the non-divine entities within their domain. This would align with the concept of completeness as defined previously, through it allowing for a plural set of fundamental entities—that is, what we can term 'plural fundamentality.'

Now, alongside the fundamentality of these entities, they will also clearly be deities. However, to avoid the issue of volitional conflict, we should not require the 'gods' to be maximally powerful, but rather just significantly, yet finitely, powerful and authoritative within their respective domains. This reflects the fact that if multiple fundamental deities were conceived as having maximal power, it could lead to irresolvable conflicts, where two or more deities have incompatible desires or intentions regarding non-rational actions, such as the direction of the Sun's rotation on its axis. This would be an impossible state of affairs for entities defined as maximally powerful, as their conflicting wills would negate each other's maximal power. Hence, if we are to deal with the issue of multiple fundamental deities within a polytheistic context they ought to be understood as having a specific scope or sphere of influence, within which they are the ultimate grounds of being and the highest arbiters of reality. For example, Zeus exercises his power and authority with respect to the sky and kingship, Poseidon with respect to the sea and earthquakes, and Athena with respect to wisdom and war, etc. Hence, each deity would be supremely powerful

and independent within their domain, but not necessarily maximal in an absolute sense that encompasses all of reality.

Now, one might object that if we accept the Greek gods' independence on the basis of their ability to oppose or conspire against Zeus, then consistency demands we question the independence of the God of monotheistic traditions who also faces opposition from other spiritual beings. Here, one could potentially present a counterexample from Christian theology, invoking the case of Satan's opposition to God. However, in traditional Christian theology, Satan's ability to oppose God does not constitute a conspiracy in a sense that would threaten divine independence. Satan's opposition operates within divinely permitted boundaries—he cannot act without God's permission (as seen in Job 1–2) and his ultimate defeat is assured. This is categorically different from cases where a deity's existence or power could genuinely be threatened by other beings. The distinction here is between opposition within a divinely maintained order and threats to the very existence or fundamental status of the deity.

Thus, all in all, the model of Fundamentality Polytheism allows for a pluralistic conception of 'god,' where multiple 'gods' coexist as fundamental entities grounding distinct aspects of reality. It captures the intuition that the 'gods' are the ultimate metaphysical grounds of the phenomena associated with them, without requiring them to be all-encompassing. Furthermore, the domain-specific approach furnished by Fundamentality Polytheism can help to make sense of the complex relationships and interactions between the 'gods' as described in the myths. That is, the conflicts, alliances and power struggles among the 'gods' can be understood as negotiations and assertions of their respective fundamental roles within the cosmic order. And when 'gods' clash or collaborate, it can be seen as a working out of the metaphysical grounding relations that define their domains and the reality they collectively sustain. Also, this dynamism and tension within the pantheon would not necessarily undermine their fundamental status, but rather reflect the intricate web of dependencies and influences that shape the mythological world. Our definition of the notion of 'god' that features within the further explications of Fundamentality Monotheism and Fundamentality Polytheism therefore remains untouched by the Pantheon Objection. Hence the former, and now also the latter, explications can be embraced as adequate definitions of these important theological terms.

7. Interfaith Implications of Explication

The interfaith implications of the position established here offer a promising resolution to long-standing debates concerning the nature of Trinitarianism.

Critics often characterize the latter as polytheistic, due to its affirmation of multiple divine persons. However, this characterization rests on a fundamental misunderstanding of how we should define monotheism and polytheism. As argued here, monotheism should not be defined simply as belief in one deity, but rather as belief in one fundamental deity. Correspondingly, polytheism is better understood not as mere belief in multiple deities, but as belief in multiple fundamental deities. This definitional clarification then has profound implications for how we should categorize Trinitarianism. Monarchical Trinitarianism, as defended in the work of John Behr (2018), Beau Branson (2020) and Joshua Sijuwade (2022) provides a compelling framework that demonstrates how Trinitarianism can be properly classified as monotheistic. This model maintains that while there are three divine persons—the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—who are relationally distinct and ontologically equal (each being rightly called 'God' in a secondary or predicative sense), there is only one fundamental deity: the Father, who is uniquely 'God' in the primary or nominal sense. In it, the Father holds a unique position as the uncaused cause and ungrounded ground of all reality, including both the Son and Spirit, as well as all created things. This makes the Father the sole fundamental entity within reality. The Son and Spirit, while fully divine and equal in nature to the Father, derive their being from the Father and thus are not themselves fundamental. They share fully in the Father's divinity without being "the one God" in the nominal sense. This framework resolves the apparent tension between Trinitarianism and monotheism. While affirming the full deity of three distinct persons, it maintains strict monotheism by recognising only one fundamental deity. The other divine persons, while truly divine, are derivatively so, receiving their deity from the Father as the sole ultimate source. And thus the key insight is that having multiple divine persons need not necessarily entail having multiple fundamental deities. Hence, this resolution demonstrates that the charge of polytheism against Trinitarianism stems from an oversimplified understanding of both monotheism and the Trinity.

When properly understood through the lens of fundamentality rather than mere numerical counting of divine persons, Trinitarianism emerges as a sophisticated form of monotheism that maintains both the unity of God and the full deity of Father, Son and Spirit. Furthermore, given our explication of monotheism, Trinitarianism can be properly classified as monotheistic in precisely the same sense as Judaism and Islam, each of which posits the existence of just one fundamental deity (Yahweh for Judaism, and Allah for Islam). Trinitarianism, envisaged through the lens of Monarchical Trinitarianism, likewise affirms only one fundamental deity: the Father.

This crucial insight reveals that the true area of theological disagreement between these faiths does not concern monotheism—as this is affirmed across all three traditions—but rather centres on the debate between Trinitarianism and Unitarianism, which we can define as follows:[5]

(17) (Trinitarianism)	The belief in the existence of three deities (divine persons)—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—with the Father being the sole fundamental deity from whom the Son and Spirit derive their divine nature.
(18) (Unitarianism)	The belief in the existence of exactly one deity (whether identified as Allah, Yahweh, or otherwise), who is both the sole deity and the sole fundamental deity.

The central point of contention between these theological positions thus concerns the number of divine persons that exist within reality. Trinitarianism affirms the existence of three such persons, while maintaining that only one (the Father) is fundamental,[6] whereas Unitarianism[7] maintains that there is exactly one divine person who is, by definition, fundamental. This clarification helps us better understand the real nature of the theological dispute: it is not about whether monotheism is true (as all parties agree on this point when properly understood in terms of fundamentality), but rather about whether reality includes multiple divine persons or just one. This reframing of the debate has significant implications for interfaith dialogue and theological discussion. It suggests that participants in these discussions might make more progress by focusing their attention on arguments for and against the existence of multiple divine persons, rather than on accusations of polytheism that arise from misunderstanding the nature of monotheism. The question is not whether there can be multiple divine persons while maintaining monotheism (as Monarchical Trinitarianism shows this to be possible),[8] but whether there actually are multiple divine persons in reality. Moreover, this understanding helps explain why

5. Unitarianism is defended most prominently in the contemporary philosophical and theological literature by Dale Tuggy (2014).

6. Although Trinitarianism affirms the existence of only three deities, it is still compatible with the view that there are more than three deities in reality—as the former deities, the Father, the Son and the Spirit, are *supreme* deities, in the sense of being maximal in all of their attributes, whereas the other deities that potentially exist lack maximality. It is an open question whether (contemporary) Judaism and Islam are also compatible with a position holding that there are additional (non-maximal) deities within reality.

7. Unitarianism, so construed, is thus a version of Deity Monotheism.

8. I leave it as an open question whether other forms of Trinitarianism are able to do this as well.

traditional arguments for monotheism, such as arguments from divine simplicity or necessary existence, do not automatically decide between Trinitarianism and Unitarianism. These arguments typically establish the existence of one fundamental divine being, but leave open the possibility that this being (the Father in Trinitarian thought) might generate other divine persons who share in the divine nature while remaining dependent on their source. Thus, given our explicative work here, the path forward in these theological debates lies not in resolving disputes about monotheism—which all parties effectively embrace—but in examining the philosophical and theological evidence for whether the one fundamental divine being exists alone or generates other divine persons who share in its nature.[9]

8. Conclusion

To conclude, this article has analysed monotheism through the lens of fundamentality. Our aim has been to develop a philosophically robust definition that can illuminate rather than obscure the complex theological phenomena found in ancient and contemporary religious traditions. While Carnap's method provides useful criteria for evaluation, the ultimate test of our explication is its ability to generate fruitful insights into the nature of monotheistic and polytheistic beliefs. We began by examining traditional numerical views, and the relevant historical developments, and then went on to explore Bennett's concept of building-fundamentality and Carnap's method of explication. After analysing 'god' in terms of fundamentality and divinity, we developed an explication of monotheism using fundamentality, addressed the Pantheon Objection, and explored implications for interfaith dialogue. This comprehensive analysis presents a reasoned case for understanding monotheism primarily in terms of fundamentality rather than mere numerical counting, while also acknowledging the complexities of this notion and the potential for more nuanced interfaith dialogue.

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