Gregory of Nyssa on the Individuation of Actions and Events
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## Introduction

It's difficult to have better credentials as a representative of Eastern Christian thought than St. Gregory of Nyssa. At the end of the Second Ecumenical Council, being in agreement with Gregory about the Trinity was literally made part of the legal definition of a catholic church by Roman law (Pharr, Davidson and Pharr, 1952, 440). Centuries later, the fathers of the Seventh Ecumenical Council declared that Gregory "is called by all, the father of fathers" (MANSI, 1960, vol. XIII, 293e). In his defense of the doctrine of the Trinity, Gregory articulates a very specific view on a topic that in recent decades has become of great concern in analytic metaphysics – the individuation of actions and events. In addition, his view provides an answer to a lingering question about event individuation within a broadly Davidsonian approach that may prove to be a fresh and attractive alternative within the current debate.

This chapter first maps out the current landscape within contemporary analytic metaphysics. Next, it briefly explains why the issue is critical to Gregory's Trinitarian theology. Finally, it places Gregory within the contemporary landscape, showing how his position is in a sense "more Davidsonian than Davidson."

## I. Actions and Events: The Current Debate

Common sense distinguishes between "things" (like tables, hands, and horses) and "events" (like the Big Bang, or the resurrection). The former, philosophers have called (primary) substances, individuals, concrete particulars, and so on. But "substance" is ambiguous in the context of Trinitarian theology, and much recent work on the metaphysics of events claims that they, too, are in some sense "particular" or "individual," while if events exist, they too are in some sense "things." So for the purpose of marking the distinction, and since we will later encounter this term in Gregory anyway, let's speak of "hypostases" (tables, hands, horses, and so on) on the one hand, and "events" (the Big Bang, the resurrection, and so on) on the other.

This distinction is grounded in common sense, but how should we characterize these two categories of entities? And what is the relationship between them? Are events "built" out of hypostases (and their properties), and reducible to them? Are events repeatable entities (like universals), or are they unrepeatable like hypostases? When do two event descriptions describe the *same* event, rather than *distinct* events? These are among the questions about the metaphysics of events that contemporary philosophers have weighed in on. While questions remain, some amount of consensus has emerged on some of these questions.

Another question is, "What does any of this have to do with Gregory of Nyssa or the doctrine of the Trinity?" The answer to that involves something called the doctrine of *inseparable*

*operations ad extra*. (I'll shorten this to "inseparable operations." In the East the phenomenon of inseparable operations is sometimes referred to as "*synergy*.") This doctrine says that all the activities of the three hypostases of the Trinity, at least insofar as they relate to things *outside* of ("*ad extra*") the Trinity (i.e., as they relate to all *created* beings) are not only qualitatively identical or identical in *kind*, but *numerically* identical – that is, they perform literally the same *particular* (token) actions – and thus are united in their activities in a way that men, angels and other created beings cannot be. (To prevent confusion in what follows between having the same *kind* of actions or the same *particular* actions, I'll use the terms "action-types" "action-tokens," or "token actions." And since Gregory uses the Greek word *energeia* in these contexts, I'll speak of *energeia*-types and *energeia*-tokens as well.)

Today, inseparable operations are often seen as a problematic and unnecessary part of traditional thinking about the Trinity. But it truly was *integral* to the traditional view, since, as we'll see, the traditional defense of the Trinity as monotheistic required inseparable operations in a way that modern Social Trinitarianism, though often inspired by Gregory and his Cappadocian colleagues, does not.

The view requires a fairly definite position on the metaphysics of event and action individuation in order to be possible, or even intelligible. And we can see such a position articulated in Gregory of Nyssa's Trinitarian writings. One might think, given the opposition to the view among today's theologians and philosophers, that there would be something highly problematic about it. In fact, we will find not only that it fits neatly into the most popular view on actions and events today, but that the way Gregory develops the view may even provide an attractive solution to some lingering questions in this area.

### Recent History of the Metaphysics of Actions and Events

The literature on the metaphysics of events within analytic philosophy has been dominated by Donald Davidson's pioneering work beginning in the 1960's and continuing into the 1980's. Davidson argued that events must be construed as *particular* (unrepeatable, "datable and locatable" items) rather than *universal* (repeatable), and that we must take events seriously as an ontological category distinct from, and not reducible to, hypostases and their properties. Indeed, for Davidson, events need not even be *individuated by* the hypostases, properties and times that figure into their descriptions. Questions remain about how, exactly, events *are* to be individuated on a Davidsonian view. But his arguments have persuaded most metaphysicians of at least the broad contours of his approach. And we will see that Gregory of Nyssa may have something to contribute to the question how events should be individuated. Space does not permit a full investigation of the current debate, but we will briefly introduce that debate, and Davidson's view, by way of two opposing views – those of Roderick Chisholm and Jaegwon Kim.[1]

### Chisholm

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[1] In organizing the summary that follows, I'm indebted to Loux's admirably clear and concise presentation on pp. 142-146 of *Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction*, which see for more details, as well as for a useful list of further readings on p. 148.

In the 1970's, Chisholm articulated a unified account of states of affairs, propositions and events. States of affairs are usually given in the form <X's being F>, for example, "this rose's being red," and Chisholm takes states of affairs to be characterized by the facts that (A) they can be "entertained" (conceived), and (B) they can obtain or fail to obtain. Chisholm construes propositions and events as two sub-categories of states of affairs. He notes that some states of affairs either always obtain or always fail to obtain, while others can obtain at one time and fail to obtain at another time. The former, according to Chisholm, are propositions, the latter are events.

A consequence of this account was that events *must* be in principle *repeatable*. Suppose a state of affairs is indexed to a time (for example, <Branson's writing "Chisholm" *at 12:01am January 1, 2021*>). If I write "Chisholm" at exactly that time, then it will forever be the case that I wrote "Chisholm" *at that time*. So if that state of affairs ever obtains, it *always* obtains, and if it ever fails to obtain, it always fails to obtain. So since time-indexed states of affairs will either always obtain or always fail to obtain, *all* time-indexed states of affairs will be *propositions*. Thus, for a state of affairs to be an event it *must lack* a time index (for example, <Branson's writing the name "Chisholm">, with no time index.) But since events *must* lack a time index, they could all, in principle, be repeated at multiple different points in time. That is, every time I write the name "Chisholm," literally the same event is recurring each time. Hence, on this account, events are like universals, in the sense that they are *repeatable* entities.

Davidson raised several problems for Chisholm's view, and most philosophers (including, eventually, Chisholm himself) have agreed with Davidson that events must be conceived as particulars (unrepeatable), rather than universals (repeatable). Some of Davidson's criticisms of Chisholm are too technical to explain in this summary, but we can mention a few briefly.

First, for Chisholm there can be no dateable events. E.g., <The sun's rising> is a Chisholmian event, but <The sun's rising on January 1, 2021> is not. This seems counterintuitive. Second, we face difficulties with counting events. If <there being an earthquake> is an event, then, if an earthquake happens on two separate occasions, perhaps there have not been two earthquakes, but only a single earthquake that occurred twice. Indeed, perhaps I have not had 21 (ahem… or so) birthdays, but the same birthday 21 (or so) times. Chisholm attempted to address these concerns (Chisholm, 1970), but, as Davidson saw it, in an awkward and ultimately unsatisfactory way (Davidson, 1970).

Another issue with counting events brings out the sense in which Chisholm's account individuates events in a "fine-grained" way. Suppose my cat meows *loudly* at time *t* (which, let's say, he usually doesn't do). The proposition that my cat meowed at *t* is not the same as the proposition that my cat meowed *loudly* at *t*, because one could have been true even if the other were false. Since these are distinct propositions, they are distinct states of affairs for Chisholm. Now simply remove the time indexes and we should still have distinct states of affairs (<my cat's meowing> and <my cat's meowing loudly>). But now instead of distinct propositions, they will be distinct events. So when my cat meows *loudly*, we have *two* events taking place at the same time, in the same place, and involving all the same hypostases, properties, and so forth. In this sense, Chisholm's account of events is the most "fine-grained" of the three we will look at.

Nearly any conceivable difference in a description of an event yields multiple events, where more "coarse-grained" accounts would see only a single event.

Eventually Chisholm himself changed his views both about propositions not changing their truth values, and about events being repeatable, coming closer to Davidson.

## Kim and Davidson

Kim (1993, 3-21; 33-52; and *passim*) agrees with Davidson (and against the earlier Chisholm) that events are unrepeatable. But Kim's view is still more fine-grained than Davidson's (though more coarse-grained than Chisholm's). (To say X's view is more "fine-grained" about individuation than Y's is just to say that there are cases where X would see two or more events but Y would see only a single event.)

According to Kim, an event is the exemplification of a property (or relation) by a hypostasis (or group of hypostases) at a time. Hence, Kim's view is sometimes called the "property exemplification" account. It is also sometimes described as a theory of "structured" events, since, according to Kim, events have a certain *structure* and can in some sense be *analyzed* into three components: (1) the hypostasis (or hypostases), which he calls the "constitutive particular(s)," (2) the property (or relation), which he calls the "constitutive property (relation)," and (3) the time, which he calls the "constitutive time." On Kim's view, we have distinct events when we have any distinctions in the constituent particular(s), the constituent property (relation), *or* the constituent time. But Davidson rejects the attempt to analyze events as having structure.

Let's take an example. Most philosophers agree an action is a kind of event. On a Kimian view, the hypostasis performing the action is the constitutive particular, and the generic action (the kind of action) is the constitutive property. Suppose Jones murders his neighbor, Smith, at midnight, by stabbing him with a knife (at midnight). For Kim, since stabbing and murdering are different relations, these are two distinct events. Kim has a system of notation that would represent one as [(Jones, Smith, midnight), stabbing], and the other as [(Jones, Smith, midnight), murdering]. Since the analyses are not identical, neither are the events. Thus, <Jones's stabbing Smith at midnight> ≠ <Jones's murdering Smith at midnight>. Since Davidson sees events as *structureless* particulars however, there is not automatically anything to individuate two events here. Davidson will be inclined to say that there is only a single event – X – and that X was *both* a stabbing *and* a murder, and so can be described either way. That is, for Davidson, X = <Jones's stabbing Smith at midnight> = <Jones's murdering Smith at midnight>. Hence, Davidsonian events are more "coarse-grained" and Kimian events more "fine-grained."

## Importance for Inseparable actions

So, with Chisholm we have repeatable events, with Kim we have unrepeatable, but structured events, and with Davidson we have unrepeatable, unstructured events. Furthermore, from Chisholm to Kim to Davidson we have increasingly more coarse-grained individuation. We can now ask how event / action individuation is relevant to the doctrine of the Trinity, and to the doctrine of inseparable operations.

For Kim, distinct hypostases yield distinct constitutive particulars, thus distinct events, thus distinct actions. So, the doctrine of inseparable operations seems to be impossible on a Kimian view of events (and perhaps even more obviously on a Chisholmian one). For Kim, <the Father's creating the universe in the beginning> ≠ <The Son's creating the universe in the beginning>, given that the Father ≠ the Son.

Davidson, on the other hand, could allow for inseparable operations, at least in theory. Of course, Davidson never considered the question whether two distinct hypostases in the *same* possible world might perform the same action. However, considering *different* possible worlds, Davidson is explicit that he believes the same action could have been performed by a different person – at least in some cases. Chisholm at one point challenges Davidson:

> "Consider that entity which, according to Davidson's analysis, Sebastian is said to stroll. Could some other person have strolled it? …" (Chisholm, 1971, 182)

Davidson responds:

> "Like many counterfactuals, the truth value, and indeed intelligibility, of these questions depends on background assumptions. Suppose that Sebastian's stroll was taken in response to orders from the commander of his secret society: each night someone, chosen by drawing a card, takes a stroll at 2 a.m. Then we might say that had the cards fallen out differently another person would have taken that stroll…" (Davidson, 2001, p. 197)

So Davidson's view is clearly that the hypostasis that performs the action is not (at least not always) *essential* to an action, since two distinct hypostases, in different possible worlds, could have taken the same stroll. This means distinct hypostases don't individuate actions across different possible worlds. Of course one could simply stipulate that distinct hypostases *in the same world* would individuate actions. But there is nothing about the account that requires this.

Of course, in our experience no two hypostases perform literally the same token action. So, even though the account doesn't require that distinct hypostases yield distinct events, *should* we perhaps add this as an additional postulate?

That may be tempting, but consider the following. (1) Since the account of events thus far doesn't require that distinct hypostases yield distinct events, it *is* an additional assumption, so we have to ask whether it is *ad hoc* or begs any questions. (2) As we will see, Gregory of Nyssa's account of action individuation results, in a non ad hoc way, in distinct *created* hypostases always performing distinct actions, but not so for *uncreated* hypostases. Thus, his account preserves our intuition that (in observable cases) two hypostases can't have inseparable operations. So if we simply stipulated that distinct hypostases always yield distinct events, we would beg the question against Gregory and the doctrine of inseparable operations. Instead, we must see what plausible, non *ad hoc* accounts of the individuation of events / actions there might be that would be consistent with Davidsonian coarse-grained individuation. We'll mention Davidson's attempts here, and later see what Gregory would say.

<center>Lingering Questions About the Davidsonian View</center>

The debate about event individuation continues to be lively, and space does not allow us to cover all the arguments on each side. But we can note that almost all philosophers in this area (including eventually Chisholm himself) agree with Davidson that events must be treated as particular (unrepeatable). And although debate continues, the majority favor a more coarse-grained approach over a more fine-grained approach. There are, however, lingering questions about the individuation of events on a Davidsonian view.

Quine pressed Davidson for clear identity criteria for events. "No entity without identity," as the Quinean slogan goes. Davidson's initial response was that events are identical when they have all the same causes and effects. This was immediately criticized as circular – causes and effects are themselves events, and themselves stand in need of individuation before they can individuate other events. Davidson initially insisted that, at least formally speaking, it was not circular. However, he later acknowledged that there was indeed a vicious circularity involved and rejected that account.

Quine, though not a fan of accepting events into one's ontology, suggested events might be individuated in terms of spatiotemporal location. Events are identical when they occur at the same time and place. Davidson (2001, 309) eventually agreed something like this was probably right, however he had already noted some counterintuitive consequences that still occasion debate. E.g., suppose a sphere rotates on an axis while simultaneously becoming warmer. Since the two events take place in the same place at the same time, the spatiotemporal account of event individuation would count them as one event (Davidson, 2001, p.178-179). But unlike Smith's stabbing Jones and Smith's murdering Jones, it's hard to accept that a sphere's rotating and its warming are literally the same event. Many philosophers are not happy with the spatiotemporal account for this and other reasons, and debate continues concerning how best to individuate events within a broadly Davidsonian, coarse-grained approach.

As we'll see, like Davidson, Gregory of Nyssa has a coarse-grained view of event individuation. This comes out in his defenses against the argument that the doctrine of the Trinity is tritheistic, which I will call "the three gods problem" or "3G" for short. And he has an interesting account that may solve the problem Davidson arguably never adequately resolved. At the very least, Gregory's is a perspective that may prove attractive to many in this debate.

## II. Relevance to the Trinity and Inseparable Operations

How is event individuation relevant to Trinitarianism? To answer that question, it's useful to contrast Gregory's Trinitarianism with Social Trinitarianism (ST). Social Trinitarians (ST-ans) often appeal to Gregory and the other Cappadocian fathers to support ST. How Gregory's view differs from ST will reveal why inseparable operations are critical to Gregory (and why they *don't* seem critical to most ST-ans). And this in the end will illuminate his metaphysics as well.

According to standard versions of ST, the word "God" or "god" has (at least) two different senses or uses: it can function as a referring expression, or simply as a predicate (like "divine"). In English, it's traditional to capitalize "God" when referring to "the true God" and to use lower-case "god" when referring to a "false god" (or gods), regardless of whether the word is being

used as a proper name (which we would normally capitalize) or a common name (i.e., a predicate nominative, which we ordinarily would not capitalize). Since in almost every other scenario English uses capital and lower case letters to distinguish between proper and common names (proper and common nouns), this can create confusion, making it look as though "God" is being used as a proper name when it is in fact being used as a common name (common noun), as in "Thou art man, and not God" (Ezek. 28:9), where "God" looks like a name but is actually a predicate (parallel to "man"). So for clarity's sake, I will avoid the convention of using lower-case and capital letters to distinguish between true and false gods, and instead use them in the ordinary way, to distinguish between a *proper noun* (or at least a *singular referring term*) ("God") and a *common noun* ("god"), not implying by the lower-case letter that the one so described is necessarily a "false" god in any sense. Thus, we would write Ezek. 28:9 as "Thou art man, and not god," and we would write Psalm 77:13 as "Thy way, O God, is in the sanctuary: who is so great a god as our god?" (not implying, obviously, that God is a false god!)

According to standard ST, instances of "is god" applied to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit individually should be read as involving the "is" of *predication* and "god" used as a predicate, *not* as involving the "is" of *numerical identity*, and "God" used as a singular term. The latter would mean that each hypostasis of the Trinity (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) is identical to a hypostasis (or some kind of quasi-hypostasis) called "God." But that would be incompatible with treating the hypostases as genuinely numerically distinct (at least on the standard account of identity), since "Father = God" and "Son = God" entail "Father = Son."

ST-ans are right to cite the Cappadocians as believing in three straightforwardly distinct hypostases. And they are right to note the distinctions between "God" and "god" and between the "is" of identity and the "is" of predication. But despite ST-ans' appeal to the Cappadocians for historical support, at this point the parallels between ST and the Cappadocians begin breaking down quickly.

First, for most ST-ans, "capital-G" God is the Trinity, rather than the Father. A difficulty here is that ST affirms that the Father is god, the Son is god, and the Holy Spirit is god. But presumably *God* is also god (otherwise, why call Him "God"?) Yet, it seems there should either be just *one* thing that "is god" or perhaps *three* things that "are god," but *not four*.

This leads William Lane Craig (Moreland and Craig, 2003), for example, to distinguish two senses of "is god," one meaning "literally instantiates the divine nature," and another meaning "is divine" in some looser, analogical sense, like "is *part* of something that instantiates the divine nature." Label those "$god_1$" and "$god_2$." For Craig, God (the Trinity) is $god_1$, while the Father is $god_2$, the Son is $god_2$, and the Holy Spirit is $god_2$. Unfortunately, Craig must (and does) admit, that *neither* the Father, *nor* the Son *nor* the Holy Spirit instantiates the divine nature! William Hasker (2013), on the other hand, constructs a model in which the three hypostases are characterized by a single trope of the divine nature, hence although there are three things that "are god," there is only a single "instance" of divinity. As we'll see, this is much closer to Gregory than Craig, though Gregory would say that, in the end, it isn't strictly speaking relevant to 3G.

Now in contrast to Craig, the Cappadocians don't talk about multiple senses of "god." (And they absolutely don't deny that the three hypostases instantiate the divine nature!) On the other hand, they *do* spend a lot of time talking about the activities of the divine hypostases being "undivided" or "inseparable," while ST-ans almost always see inseparable operations as superfluous, and most even *reject* (or reinterpret) the doctrine, including both Craig and Hasker. Finally, I've argued elsewhere (Branson, n.d.) that for Gregory, and for the Eastern tradition more generally, capital-G God is the Father, as it is in the New Testament, rather than the Trinity, as in standard ST.[2] So, while ST and the Cappadocians share some initial moves, they part ways quickly. Why?

Given the moves ST-ans make to defeat 3G, it's obvious why they find inseparable operations superfluous. Craig supposes that making the Trinity be God (and "god" in the fullest sense), and making Father, Son and Holy Spirit be "god" only in a secondary sense, already solves the problem. Hasker takes the sharing of a trope to solve the problem. If the problem has already been solved, inseparable operations really are superfluous.

The reason inseparable operations are critical for Gregory is that, as we will see, he would either reject these moves outright (like Craig's), or hold that they are dialectically useful but not in fact relevant to 3G (Hasker's). We can see why Gregory would reject a Craig-style approach by looking at his response to his younger colleague, Ablabius, in *Ad Ablabium*. Ablabius notes that Peter, James and John are "in" one manhood, just as Father, Son and Holy Spirit are "in" one godhood. We don't forbid people to call Peter, James and John three men, so Ablabius asks, why do we forbid people to say there are three gods?

Now ST-ans typically only try to get *some* sense in which it's true that "There is only one god." But the question put to Gregory by Ablabius is not, "How is there *some* sense in which there is only one god?" but, "How is there *no* sense in which there are *three* gods?" It's easy to miss this distinction, but these are very different questions. To answer the first, we need only distinguish between "god$_1$" and "god$_2$" (as Craig does). Even if there are three gods$_2$ (three hypostases, each of which "is god$_2$"), there is *some sense* in which there is only one god, because there is only one god$_1$ (one thing that instantiates the divine nature). Mission accomplished! But Ablabius' point (which Gregory accepts) is that this is not enough. Christianity does not *merely* say there is *some* sense in which there *is* one god. Rather, as Ablabius puts it, "We *forbid* men to say there are three gods." If there were any sense in which there were three gods, we could not forbid people to say so – we could only insist they specify that there are three gods only in the appropriate sense! So, without further complications, Craig's account yields the result that there *is some* legitimate sense of "god" (namely "god$_2$") such that there *are* three gods. And that is less than what Christians want to say.

But Gregory of course agrees there are three divine hypostases. Indeed, for Gregory each "is god" even in the "fullest" sense of the term – each literally instantiates the divine nature. Doesn't it just follow *automatically* that there are three gods?

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[2] See (Widdicombe, 1994), (Beeley, 2007), (Beeley, 2008) and (Behr, 2018) for more on God as the Father in Gregory of Nyssa and other early fathers.

Gregory gives three responses to this question, directed towards different audiences (Branson, 2014, 116-123). One is for illiterate or uneducated people (the vast majority of a fourth-century bishop's audience) but (as he admits) fails to adequately address the logic of 3G. The second focuses on the shared nature of the hypostases, which I call the "Unity of Nature Argument" (UNA). UNA is for an educated audience of pagans and non-orthodox Christians, and adequately addresses the objection, based on premises *that audience* would accept, but that he rejects. Thus, its purpose is merely dialectical. The premise Gregory rejects is the claim that "god" predicates the divine nature. Those who miss the fact that Gregory *rejects* this semantic claim can easily be misled into believing that Gregory actually endorses UNA, while in fact he explicitly rejects it. We won't have space to explore UNA in detail, but more detail can be found in (Branson, 2014, 123-151). His final response is directed towards other educated orthodox Christians, and adequately addresses the logic of the argument based on premises he *actually accepts*. This response focuses on the inseparable operations. I call it the "Unity of Action Argument" (UAA). It will show why inseparable operations are crucial for Gregory, and in the process what his views on event / action individuation are. In the next section, we will first look at what Gregory takes the word "god" to predicate (spoiler alert: it's an *activity*, not a *nature*). Second, we'll look (very briefly) at how he thinks *counting* works to see why *token* actions are what to focus on. Then we'll see how he individuates hypostases, and finally how he individuates token *energeiai* (activities) and how that addresses 3G. In the subsequent section, we'll see how this all fits into our contemporary debate.

## III. Gregory's Account

UAA centers on three related points: two semantic, and one metaphysical. First, the (for Gregory, traditional) semantic point that "god" (at least as it's used in the Bible) does not predicate the divine nature, but an *energeia* (activity). That is, it is not a *natural kind term*, like "man," or "horse," or "dog," but an *agent noun* like "runner," or "shoemaker," or "speaker." So, to say that X "is (a) god" is not to say that X *has a certain nature*, but that X *performs a certain kind of activity*. Second, the (at the time, common) semantic claim that when we count by agent nouns, we do not count the number of hypostases engaged in a token of some action-type, rather we count the number of tokens of that action-type that are engaged in by some hypostasis. Finally, the doctrine of inseparable operations, the metaphysical claim that, when the hypostases act *ad extra*, they perform *a single token activity (energeia)*. We'll go through those in turn.

### The Semantics of "god"

First, some historical background. It turns out there is an unmistakable trend in the early Christian tradition leading up to Gregory that the word "god" does not predicate the divine nature, but a certain kind of *activity*. The following are just a few examples.

Justin Martyr (c. 150 AD):

> "Father," *and "God,"* and "Creator," and "Lord," and "master," are not names (ὀνόματα), but *attributions derived from His well-doing and works (ἔργα).*" (St. Justin Martyr et al., 1885, 190) Emphasis mine.

Theophilus of Antioch (c. 180 AD):

> And he is called God (θεός) on account of His having placed (τεθεικέναι, from τίθημι) all things on security afforded by Himself; and on account of θέειν (from θέω). For θέειν is running, and moving, and *energizing*, and nourishing, and foreseeing, and governing, and making all things alive. (Theophilus of Antioch et al., 1905, 90)

Origen (c. 215 AD):

> Whatever, therefore, we have predicated of the Wisdom of God, this will be appropriately applied and understood of the Son of God, in virtue of His being the Life, and the Word, and the Truth and the Resurrection: For *all these titles are derived from His power and operations* [Lat. *operibus*, = Gr. *energeia*]… (Tertullian et al., 1885, 247)

There are also examples from among other pro-Nicene theologians. For example, St. Ambrose:

> For *'God' and 'Lord' is a name of majesty, a name of power*… God is He, therefore, and Lord, *either because His rule is over all, or because He beholdeth all things*… (St. Ambrose of Milan, 1896, 202)

> So again, when you read, 'The Lord rained from the Lord,' acknowledge the unity of Godhead, *for unity in operation doth not allow of more than one individual God*, even as the Lord Himself has shown, saying: 'Believe Me, that I am in the Father, and the Father in Me: or believe Me for the very works' sake.' [John 10:38] Here, too, we see that *unity of Godhead is signified by unity in operation* (St. Ambrose of Milan, 1896, 205).

Thus, it's no surprise to find Gregory saying that "god" predicates, not the divine nature, but some kind of activity. In *Ad Eustathium*, Gregory argues at length that there is nothing special about the predicate "god," and that it does not predicate the divine nature. It is merely one predicate among many expressing another attribute among many had by the three divine hypostases – not in principle different from "good" or "mighty" or "righteous." Indeed, Gregory argues that some of these predicates (like "good") are actually *more* appropriate to God than "god," since the Bible is not shy about calling even demons gods, while it never calls demons *good*. Hence, "the good one" is an even more appropriate description of God than "god"!

That "god" predicates the divine nature is rather *his opponents'* view:

> But *they* [his opponents] say that this appellation ["god"] is indicative of nature, and that, as the nature of the Spirit is not common to the Father and the Son, for this reason neither does he partake in the community of this [name] [i.e., "god"] (St. Gregory of Nyssa, 1893, 328) (emphasis mine).[3]

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[3] The NPNF translation has "community of this *attribute*" here, but the Greek is "name" (ὄνομα). It would make little sense to have "attribute" in this context.

Critically, Gregory does not *agree* that "god" predicates the nature. Rather, he argues that, because the Holy Spirit has the divine nature anyway, *even if* "god" *did* predicate the divine nature (which it doesn't!), it would *still* follow that "god" could be predicated of the Holy Spirit:

> …*even if* the name of godhood *did* mean the nature, this same appellation ["god"] properly applies to the Holy Spirit also, as the commonality of the essence shows (St. Gregory of Nyssa, 1958). (Translation mine.)

Gregory is clear that *his own* view on why the Holy Spirit "is god" is that "god" predicates some type of *activity* (*energeia*):

> [T]he force of the appellation ["god"] is the indication of some power, either of oversight or of operation [ἐνέργεια] (St. Gregory of Nyssa, 1893, 329).

Similar statements can be found in *Contra Eunomium* as well.

So the importance of the inseparable operations begins coming into focus. If "is god" meant "has the divine nature," inseparable operations *would* seem irrelevant and we would need to take something like either Hasker's approach (that there is a single "trope" or *instance* of the nature shared by the hypostases) or Craig's (that the single instance of the nature belongs to the Trinity, rather than the hypostases). On the other hand, if "is god" means "performs a certain kind of *activity*," the question is not how many *instances of the divine nature* there are, but how many *token actions* there are. And if we want to avoid the Craigian problem of ascribing full divinity to the Trinity, but denying it to the hypostases, then as we'll see next, just as Hasker focuses on a shared *divinity trope*, we will need *a shared token action*.

Counting

Unfortunately, we won't have space to discuss Gregory's views on counting in detail, but we can say enough to explain the focus on tropes and token actions, and why UNA and UAA are relevant to 3G at all.

Today we count F's by (1) *logical subjects* that are (2) *discernible* from (or at least, not identical to) one another, and "are F." That is, if X and Y differ in any way, and are both F-ish, we count them as "two F's." This gives rise to various paradoxes such as the puzzle of the Lump and the Statue.

Mr. Statue (so we'll name him) comes into being when he is formed out of Mr. Lump. He ceases to exist when he is smashed back into an amorphous lump of clay. Mr. Lump on the other hand, being nothing more than a lump of clay anyway, continues to exist. So Mr. Lump exists at times Mr. Statue doesn't. Thus they are discernible. Thus, not identical. And each is a physical object. So, on our modern way of counting, Mr. Lump and Mr. Statue should count as *two physical objects*, although we normally deny two physical objects can be located in the same place at the same time, and mysteriously, putting Mr. Lump (who weighs, let's say 100kg) and Mr. Statue (who naturally enough also weighs 100kg) *both* on a scale *at the same time*, for some reason

does not double the weight to 200kg as putting two 100kg weights on a scale normally would. All quite surprising!

An ancient and medieval solution to this puzzles was to count F's by how (1) *F-ness itself* (the universal, which was usually thought of as *collection* of particulars) is or can be (2) *divided into parts* of the same name as each other and as the whole (Branson, 2014, 129-134), (Cross, 2002). On this ancient view, our puzzle has a solution. Mr. Lump and Mr. Statue are *indivisible* (or at least *undivided*, while Mr. Statue exists). Suppose tropes are individuated by spatial or spatiotemporal location. Then there is only a single trope of physical objecthood and a single trope of weight shared by Mr. Lump and Mr. Statue. The physical objecthood of Mr. Lump and Mr. Statue "is one" (because it "is undivided"), so Mr. Lump and Mr. Statue *are one physical object*, even though they are not identical. In short, we count by *division* (or *divisibility*), rather than by *discernibility*. To put it in a modern idiom, we count F's by *tropes* (or "instances") *of F-ness*.

On this view, if "is god" meant "has the divine nature," but the hypostases of the Trinity share a single trope of divinity (as on Hasker's view (2013, 50-54, 109 ff., 226 ff.), and in Gregory's UNA) they count as a single god, even though they are not identical.[4] Or if, as Gregory holds (and as he argues in the UNA), the natures had by hypostases are *universals* (rather than tropes), so are never "divided" among their particulars anyway, then not only do the *divine* hypostases count as a single god, but "strictly speaking" even *human* hypostases count as one man. But that's all assuming "god" predicates the divine nature, which Gregory assumes merely for the sake of argument in UNA. By the same token, if "god" predicates a kind of *activity*, as Gregory really believes, and argues in UAA, then we get one god when we have a single *token action* shared by the three hypostases.

### Hypostases, *Ousiai*, and *Idiomata*

For reasons of space we will omit some nuance, but for our purposes we can gloss "*ousia*" (essence) and "*physis*" (nature) as roughly what today we would call a "kind-essence," and "hypostasis" as a concrete particular.

In *Ad Petrum*, Gregory initially characterizes these in grammatical terms:

> In the whole class of nouns, expressions used for things which are plural and numerically diverse have a more general sense, as for example 'man'. For anyone who employs this noun indicates the common nature…

> But other nouns have a more individual signification, in that what is contemplated in the thing signified is not the commonality of nature but a circumscription of a some reality, which, as far as its individuality goes, has no communion with what is of the same kind, as for example, Paul or Timothy. (St. Gregory of Nyssa, 2007, 250)

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[4] And since tropes are also individuated qualitatively, it is actually Arianism that counts as tritheistic, as the Cappadocians often pointed out.

He goes on to define the term "*homoousios*" as well:

> When several are taken together, as for example, Paul, Silvanus and Timothy, and one seeks a definition of the substance [οὐσία] of these human beings, no-one will give one definition of substance [οὐσία] for Paul, another for Silvanus, and yet another for Timothy. No, whatever the terms used to indicate the substance [οὐσία] of Paul they will also apply these to the others, and they are consubstantial [ὁμοούσιος] with one another who are designated by the same definition of substance [τῷ αὐτῷ λόγῳ τῆς οὐσία]. (St. Gregory of Nyssa, 2007, 250-251)

He finally defines "hypostasis" both as "what is spoken of individually" and what is distinguished from others by individual properties (*idiomata*).

> But when someone who has ascertained what is common turns his attention to the individual properties by which the one is distinguished from the other, the definition by which each is known will no longer tally in all particulars with the definition of another, even though it may be found to have certain points in common.

> This then is what we affirm: what is spoken of individually is indicated by the expression 'hypostasis'. (St. Gregory of Nyssa, 2007, 251)

This distinction between common and proper nouns was made by Greek grammarians at the time (Branson, 2014, 154-161), (DelCogliano, 2010, 207 ff.), (Zachhuber, 2000, 81 ff.), and had been taken over from the Stoics. *Ousiai* answer to *common nouns*, and hypostases to *proper nouns*.

However, Gregory later says "we have given it out that hypostasis is the confluence of the individual qualities [*idiomata*] of each [ἡ συνδρομή τῶν περὶ ἕκαστον ἰδιωμάτων]" (St. Gregory of Nyssa, 2007, 257), which seems much more metaphysically loaded than the earlier grammatical characterization. Commentators have long noted that Gregory is a bundle theorist, so, it's not surprising that in this more precise "official" definition, a hypostasis is a bundle of properties. But since he introduces the term *idioma*, we need to ask what an *idioma* is.

Answering that question again takes us back to the Stoics and the grammarians. The Stoics held that each hypostasis has some unique property distinguishing it from all others (Sedley, 1982), (Zachhuber, 2000, 88 ff), and would allow one to recognize it in other hypothetical circumstances. In other words, a property that, as we would say, individuates it across possible worlds. This is its *idioma*, and the idea is taken over by the grammarians and also by Porphyry (1975, 41) (in a slightly modified form). This corresponds not to the Aristotelian sense of "essence" (secondary *ousia*), but to the sense in which Plantinga uses "essence," (Plantinga, 1978b, 70 ff.) or what is sometimes called a "Leibnizian essence" or "individual essence" (Loux and Crisp, 2017, 112), i.e., a set of properties necessary and sufficient for being *numerically identical to a certain* hypostasis.[5]

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[5] Plantinga takes the idea of an individual essence to originate in Boethius (Plantinga, 1978a, 132), and likewise the corresponding neo-Fregean semantics Plantinga adopts. But in fact, as we said, it traces back at least to the Stoics, the grammarians, and Porphyry (Porphyry being almost

Summing up, an *ousia* is roughly what we would call a kind-essence, and is *shareable*, while an *idioma* is an *unshareable* property (roughly an individual essence). A hypostasis is roughly an individual "thing" or ordinary concrete object, and must have both an *ousia* and an *idioma*.[6]

Before continuing, note that for Gregory being "*homoousios*" ("consubstantial" or "one in being") has no *numerical* connotation. It simply describes hypostases that are *members of the same species*, like Paul, Silvanus and Timothy. Commentators frequently struggle with this fact, because they assume "*homoousios*" is *supposed to be* critical to an, in some sense, "correct" response to 3G. As Kelley (2000, 234) puts it, "theology requires" it to indicate numerical unity (even if all the evidence says otherwise!) But as we've seen, for Gregory, since "god" does not predicate the divine *ousia* anyway, being *homoousios* (although critical for *other* theological reasons!) simply isn't relevant to 3G.[7] UNA is only offered as an undercutting (not a rebutting) defeater of 3G. His real response is UAA.

<div align="center">Application to "Practices" and <em>Energeiai</em></div>

We've spent some time now on Gregory's views about the individuation of hypostases before his views on the individuation of events. Why?

First, a point to which we'll return, notice Gregory's account of the individuation of hypostases is in an important sense *unsystematic*. We do get necessary and sufficient conditions for numerical identity of hypostases (they are identical if and only if they share *idiomata*). But these necessary and sufficient conditions are not limited to any particular *framework* such as spatiotemporal location, or having all the same parts, or all the same causal powers. Any of those sorts of properties or relations *could be* among a hypostasis' *idiomata*. But none of them *need* be. Every hypostasis must have *some idioma* (or set of *idiomata*), but what those turn out to be is left to particular cases, not confined within any particular limited framework, like mereology, space-time, or causality.

The second reason we have dwelt on the individuation of hypostases is that, as it turns out, Gregory's approach to the individuation of activities (*energeiai*) is to apply literally the same

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certainly the source (or at least a source) for Boethius here. Gregory most likely takes this from both Porphyry and Apollonius Dyscolus.)

[6] In fact, there is some ambiguity in Gregory's account about whether the hypostasis is an ordinary particular or the individual essence of a particular (or collection of all of a particular's individual essences). Likewise whether an *idioma* is itself an unshareable property, or whether individual *idiomata* are, in principle, shareable, but it is the overall *collection* of *idiomata* that are unshareable (Branson, 2014, 160-169). Fortunately, these details won't matter for our current, limited purposes.

[7] It's noteworthy that, among Gregory's minor Trinitarian treatises, "*homoousios*" appears only once in *Adversus Arium et Sabellium* and once in *Ad Petrum*. The former simply says the Logos is *homoousios* with the Father, and the latter simply defines the term (which we saw above). And neither passage even has 3G in view. In the two treatises specifically written to address 3G (*Ad Ablabium* and *Ad Graecos*) the word "*homoousios*" does not occur at all.

account to them as he did to the individuation of hypostases. Just as each hypostasis has its own *idioma(ta)*, so each token activity (token *energeia*) will have its own *idioma(ta)*.

Let's look at Gregory's argument in *Ad Ablabium* after the point where he claims that "god" predicates an *energeia*, rather than a *nature*.

> Since we demonstrated in due measure from the logical proof that the expression "divinity" is not of a nature but of an activity, one perhaps would reasonably say that this is a reason that, in the case of men, those who share the same occupations with each other are enumerated and named in the plural, but that the divine is stated in the singular as one God and one divinity, even if the three subsistent entities [hypostases] should not be distinguished by the significance manifest in « the divinity », because men, even if several belong to one activity, each by himself exclusively operates what lies before him, since he shares nothing in the particular activity [καθ᾽ ἑαυτὸν ἐνεργείᾳ] with those who practice the equivalent occupation [ἐπιτηδεύοντας… ἴσος]. (St. Gregory of Nyssa, 2008)

Notice that Gregory draws a distinction between a particular, token activity (*energeia*) (καθ᾽ ἑαυτὸν ἐνεργείᾳ), which is never shared by humans (or, we can infer, other creatures) and "the one activity." He sometimes calls this a "pursuit" or "occupation" (ἐπιτήδευμα), though he's inconsistent in his terminology, sometimes using *energeia* either for the token or the type. (Note that I've been using the word "type" merely to disambiguate, but that for Gregory, this is a *resemblance class* of token activities. Hence the token activities in that resemblance class are "equivalent" (ἴσος).) Human hypostases, then, can "belong" to a single *energeia* type by each individually performing distinct *energeia* tokens *of* that type. He continues:

> Indeed, if the orators should be several, while the pursuit (ἐπιτήδευμα), being one, has the same name among the several, those who pursue it each by himself energize individually, since the one speaks powerfully and the other simply. So, among men, since the *energeia* of each in the same occupations (ἐπιτηδεύμασιν) is divided (διακεκριμένη), they are legitimately named many, since each of them is separated from the others into his own circumscribed domain according to the *idiotropon* of the *energeia*. (Adapted from (St. Gregory of Nyssa, 2008, 8-9).)

Crucially for our purposes here, the token *energeiai* of the distinct orators are individuated, but *not* by their relations to the human hypostases that perform them, rather *by their own idiomata* (here ἰδιότροπον). This in fact is the critical aspect of Gregory's solution to 3G. To the question from our discussion of Davidson above concerning token actions being individuated by the hypostases that perform them, Gregory answers they are not – *even intra-world*. Rather he constructs his example so that what individuates the token acts of orating are qualities intrinsic to the token acts themselves – namely, that they are in different rhetorical styles (the so-called "powerful" versus "simple" styles).[8] This is not to say that token *energeiai* can *only* be individuated by intrinsic qualities, instead of, say, relations, only that they need not be individuated merely by being performed by distinct hypostases.

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[8] See footnotes 35 and 36 in (St. Gregory of Nyssa, 2008a, 9) in which Duvick references Demetrius' *De Elocutione*, on the "powerful" style and Plato's *Republic* on the "simple" style.

So if it is strictly speaking true that there are multiple orators, why is it not strictly speaking true that there are three gods? Perhaps unexpectedly, Gregory's answer does not reference a shared *nature*, but shared *token activities*. While the men's *token* activities of orating are non-identical, even when of the same type, the divine hypostases' token activities, including whatever activity is predicated by "god," *are* identical.

Thus, despite Gregory accepting the comparison of the Trinity to three men *insofar as each is a triad of homoousios* hypostases, there is a striking *dis*analogy in terms of their *activities* (which, for Gregory, is the semantic content of the word "god"). Given the common views on counting we mentioned above, three human hypostases orating really would count as three orators, due to their performing three distinct token orations. But the Trinity do not count as multiple gods, since their token actions *are not* separable. The three hypostases of the Trinity count as a single god, a single savior, redeemer, etc., because all such token actions are literally identical. Thus, it turns out, the doctrine of inseparable operations really is the lynchpin of Gregory's defense of the doctrine of the Trinity as monotheistic (just as the reader may have noticed it was for Ambrose).

We will not explore Gregory's Biblical and metaphysical arguments as to why the three hypostases perform identical *energeiai*. But we can mention that part of his argument is just that there is exactly one effect for every (successfully completed) token activity. Three acts of creating should yield three universes, just as three (distinct and completed) acts of shoemaking should yield three shoes. Since there is only one universe, there was only one token act of creation. If I am only saved once, there is only one token act of (my) salvation. But the only way creation and salvation can be ascribed to multiple hypostases, while there is only one token act of creating, saving, and so on, is for multiple hypostases to be engaged in a single token act of creation, of salvation, and so on. And for Gregory, "god" is just another agent noun like "creator," "savior," and the like.

Incidentally, this raises an overlooked point. 3G focuses on there being three "gods" in what may be a myopic way. Gregory would point out that the same problem arises for *any predicate* ascribed to multiple hypostases individually, but which there is supposed to be only one of. Thus, ST, even if successful in rebutting the accusation of having three *gods*, would still face the accusation that it has three *creators*, three *saviors*, and so on. And since by hypothesis these predicates apply to multiple hypostases (not merely to the Trinity as a whole), a Craigian approach offers no solution. Likewise since they predicate *activities*, not *natures*, Hasker's approach (so long as he denies inseparable operations) offers no solution. ST-ans, then, would need some *additional* way of addressing these problems. Interestingly, even Unitarian Christians face the problem of multiple saviors! (1 Tim. 4:10; Acts 13:23; Is. 43:11) Gregory's solution, on the other hand, elegantly solves these problems all at once, and in a uniform way.

To round out a loose end, we can ask how Gregory would deal with the point that inseparable operations are counterintuitive – we never observe hypostases sharing token *energeiai*. Gregory's response would be something like the following. Although spatiotemporal relations do not form a "systematic" framework for individuating either hypostases or *energeiai*, they *do* individuate, at least intra-world. And the spirit of Gregory's position is to treat hypostases and token *energeiai* as on a par. Now for Gregory, *all* creaturely hypostases (even angels and

demons) have spatiotemporal limits and locations, and there is no action at a distance. Thus, all creaturely *energeia* tokens will be limited to the times and spaces of the hypostases that perform them. The divine hypostases, on the other hand, being transcendent, are *not* limited by time or space, and are individuated only by the intra-Trinitarian relations of "begetting" and "proceeding." But activities do not "beget" or "proceed from" other activities. Thus, there simply is nothing there that *could* individuate their token activities "*ad extra*." In other words, rather than explaining why we never observe token *energeiai* being shared by creaturely hypostases by saying:

> A) token *energeiai* are individuated by the hypostases that perform them

Gregory would say:

> B) the same spatiotemporal relations that individuate (creaturely) hypostases will *also* individuate their token *energeiai*.

(A) is incompatible with inseparable operations *tout court*. (B) is incompatible with inseparable operations *for spatiotemporally limited* hypostases – *not* for transcendent hypostases.

Interestingly, (B) is also consistent with individual created hypostases "synergizing" with the Trinity. E.g., it can be the case *both* that Moses parted the Red Sea *and* that the Lord did, or that Elisha raised the Shunamite's son *and* God did. It can also be the case that David wrote the Psalms *and* the Holy Spirit did. So, the doctrine of inseparable operations is fruitful for other areas of theology outside of triadology, such as the phenomena of miracles or scriptural inspiration.

## IV. Application to the Current Debate and Conclusion

Concluding our look at Gregory, the picture that emerges is a broadly Davidsonian view of action individuation. (1) Actions are particulars (unlike with Chisholm), and (2) they are not individuated by the hypostases that perform them (unlike with Kim). Moving a bit *beyond* Davidson though, they are individuated by their own *idiomata*, just as hypostases are. This is the centerpiece of Gregory's entire trinitarian theology, and it is also the point that may prove to be an attractive alternative within the contemporary debate.

We saw that Davidson waffled between individuating events systematically in terms of causes and effects, or systematically in terms of spatiotemporal relations. Kim individuates events systematically in terms of his three event constituents. Gregory, on the other hand, offers us an *unsystematic* way of individuating events (or at least actions). Not in the sense that there is simply no answer to how actions get individuated (they are individuated by their *idiomata* or what we would call "individual essences"), but simply in the sense that what individuates them will not be confined within any unified, over-arching framework like causality or space-time. The *idiomata* of a hypostasis could in principle be anything. So could those of an *energeia*.

In a way then, Gregory is even more Davidsonian than Davidson. Davidson's treatment of events as particular allows us to resist the kind of systematicity that comes with the early Chisholm's

account of events, which forces events into a larger framework that, for all its elegance and simplicity, yields results that violate our intuitions. And Davidson's view of events as structureless and coarse-grained resists the sort of systematicity that comes with Kim's structured particular view, which again, for all the elegance of that framework, seems to violate our intuitions in some cases. If Gregory had met Davidson, he might have said he hadn't gone far enough in this resistance to systematization. To Quine's slogan, "no entity without identity," Gregory would say "fair enough, so far as it goes." The identity conditions for actions are given by their *idiomata*. But he would reject the attempt to restrict those *idiomata* to any limited framework, whether to the events' internal structures, or their causal relata, or spatiotemporal locations, or any other limited system.

In other words, Davidson not only put events (and thus actions) on a par with ordinary concrete particulars, he also resisted – to an extent – locking them within a "system." If we follow St. Gregory of Nyssa, we can take a further step towards resisting the (over-)systematizing of their individuation, one that might arguably move us further towards a more workable theory of events. In the end, the theory of action individuation developed in Gregory's Eastern Christian approach to the Trinity may do more justice to Davidson's intuitions and inclinations than did Davidson himself.

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