

Identity and Temporality: Exploring Perfection and Incarnation

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Christology is an effort to answer the question, what can and ought one say about Jesus of Nazareth? Since Chalcedon, the most widely accepted answer to the question of what Christians ought to say about Jesus is that he is “perfect both in deity and also in humanity,” that he is “true God and true man.” According to Jaroslav Pelikan, these formulations emerged from a background of shared conviction that Jesus Christ effected salvation and that it is fitting to worship Him. It seems apparent that these shared convictions are defensible if and only if Jesus is what Chalcedon confesses him to be, namely true God and true man.¹ If He is not God, He must not be worshipped. If perfection is not or, more problematic still, cannot be truly and fully present in the human story, then that story is and always will be tragic, doomed to the finality of sin, suffering and death.²

One theological challenge of Chalcedon has always been to find a way to say coherently what the confession of the true deity and humanity of Jesus means. It seems to me that theological thought is in constant need of awareness that incoherence is incapable of confession. Appeals to mystery and paradox do not alter that logical limitation.³ So if we are to actually succeed in confessing that Jesus is truly human and truly divine, we shall have to make sense. At a minimum, this means we cannot contradict ourselves. In testing the coherence of any exposition of the Chalcedonian

¹ It should also be apparent that if one explicitly or implicitly surrenders the conviction that Jesus brings salvation or that he is to be worshipped then one will be under no logical obligation to affirm the deity of Jesus.

² To say that the story is tragic is not to say that it is devoid of nobility, joy, righteousness, beauty or meaning. But it is to insist that human life is not perfect and it bears the burdens of the fact and knowledge of imperfection.

definition it is necessary to be as clear and precise as possible about the meaning of its central terms, deity and humanity.⁴ One enduring value of Anselm's description of deity is that it supplies one clear and precise meaning to the term God.⁵ God is the one than which none greater can be conceived. I consider it the special merit of "neo-classical" metaphysics that, in its various exemplifications, it renders coherent how Anselm's formula for speaking fittingly of God can be affirmed, while affirming the actual temporality of experience.⁶ Of course, such open doctrines of God abandon a third shared conviction of the framers of the Chalcedonian definition, namely that God is in no sense mutable. But as Richard Cross has declared in his meticulous and extensive investigation of the metaphysics of the incarnation, as elaborated during the period from Aquinas to Scotus, there is no way to logically affirm the incarnation of God and insist on divine immutability.⁷ The notion of maximal greatness as inspired by Anselm makes

³ My aversion to invocation of paradox might prove understandable to anyone who attempted a little paradoxical breathing.

⁴ Surprisingly that turns out to be easier with respect to divinity than it is with respect to humanity. I know of no comparable criterion such as Anselm's rule for specifying what it means to be human. Clearly what Chalcedon prohibits us from doing is saying that to be human is to be not divine. For in the one case of Jesus Christians are convinced that he was human and divine. Happily for the question I am addressing it is not necessary for me to express any minimum conditions for humanity. I simply take it as generally agreed that human being involves ignorance and error and Jesus shared these human predicates.

⁵ Of direct relevance to the question of divine temporality is the ambiguity concerning what constitutes greatness. While it is profoundly illuminating to discipline talk of God with insistence that God be rigorously conceived as maximally great the question of what constitutes greatness permits no unambiguous answers. Some argue that the static perfection of pure actuality is greater than the dynamic perfection of self-surpassing deity. It is obviously beyond the scope of this brief essay to take or defend a position on these matters. Clearly my present judgment is on the side of those who judge dynamic perfection to be greater than static perfection.

⁶ That is not to say that I find these doctrines to be generally adequate. In fact I do not, because they seem to me to have fallen prey to the vain attempt to conceive God in a way that makes evil coherent with God's reality. That is to say, they offer theodicies with the common feature of insisting on the inevitability of evil. To find evil compatible with the reality of God is to violate Anselm's rule for thinking about God, namely that God is the maximally great one.

⁷ Richard Cross, *The Metaphysics of the Incarnation: Thomas Aquinas to Duns Scotus*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 318-319. In writing this brief essay I was forced to choose between sketching a suggestion and attempting as much precision as is after all essential to the subject. In his book *Ethics Without Ontology* (p.15), Hilary Putnam relates a remark W.V.O Quine made when asked for his thoughts about a just delivered lecture by a famous philosopher, "He paints with a broad brush," Quine said, and then added "and he thinks with one too." I have certainly painted with a broad brush. Professor Cross, on

coherence possible for those wishing to reaffirm Chalcedon's confession that God is present in temporal process, specifically in Jesus of Nazareth, coherent with respect to the problem of novelty and divinity.

But other problems remain, and it is to one of these that I invite your attention. The story of Jesus in Matthew's rendition contains Jesus' declaration that some of his hearers would not die before they saw Him coming in His Kingdom (Matthew 16:28). Unless one brings assumptions to this saying about what it cannot mean, given confidence that Jesus is indeed truly God, one will have to concede it states something quite plainly false. All of Jesus' hearers died without seeing the Son of Man coming in his Kingdom. Matthew's Jesus also warns against anyone proclaiming that He has come in some secret or spiritual sense by insisting his coming will be as lightning that shines from east to west (Matthew 24:27). A number of strategies suggest themselves for dismissing the notion that Matthew 16:28 poses a Christological problem.⁸ But dismissing this passage merely evades one item, leaving numerous others exhibiting imperfections in Jesus' knowledge, including Jesus' own declaration that no man knows the day and hour of his coming but the Father only. However, for the purpose of simplifying as much as possible the considerations required to grasp the problem I wish to address, we may ask ourselves if Jesus made grammatical mistakes as he grew capable

the other hand, does not and his work merits the closest attention, not merely for its historical interest but primarily for its constructive significance. Other works I find especially valuable are *The Logic of God Incarnate* by Thomas Morris, *Was Jesus God* by Richard Swinburne, *The Incarnation* edited by Davis, Kendall and O'Collins, *Reasons and Persons* by Derek Parfit and *Philosophical Explanations* by Robert Nozick.

⁸ One such strategy is to point out that God does not know the future in all its detail. While I take that to be a true statement it is nevertheless possible to affirm it and affirm that God knows what God will do in the future even if God's knowledge cannot extend to everything else that might occur in the future given the relative freedom i.e. indetermination of the future enjoyed by creatures. Furthermore this suggestion for dismissing the claim that Jesus' remark poses Christological problems seems less impressive when one notes that Jesus said on another occasion that the Father does know the day and hour of his coming and when one notes as well that it is error and not ignorance that the Matthean saying expresses.

of speaking his Mother's tongue. To deny that he did is surely to fall into a form of docetism, that is to say, it is to abandon Chalcedon.

If one grants then, as I do, that Jesus held at least one false belief, logic requires we show how our belief he did is coherent with our belief that God's maximal greatness includes knowledge of all that is possible to know and our belief that Jesus is truly God.

Let me begin by further specifying the meaning of the confession that Jesus is truly God. Chalcedon answers the question Jesus put to his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" It is an attribute of self-surpassing deity that, when comparing later times to early times, what was not the case becomes the case. So, for example, before the conception of Jesus, God is not incarnate, and, after the conception of Jesus, God is incarnate.⁹ With respect to the subject God, two contradictory statements are true, namely incarnate/not incarnate, because they refer to different times. The value of this observation for my endeavor is to note that the identity of God is unchanged by changes in predicates that describe God.¹⁰ What is true about God changes, but God's identity does not change. To the question, "Who is the Father of Jesus," the answer is God. To the question, "Who is the creator of all things," the answer is God. The significance of saying the Father of Jesus is God is precisely that the same one who is the creator is the father. And more radically, to the question, "Who is the creator of all things," the

⁹Obviously this remark begs for clarification with respect to the Ephesian testimony that God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world not to mention in connection with Nicea as well as Chalcedon. Space does not permit such clarification.

¹⁰The depth of revision involved in consistently affirming the reality of temporal process for God is evident here in the necessity to differentiate God's essence from God's existence this statement imposes on a doctrine of God willing to affirm it. The overwhelming consensus in the Christian theological tradition that this must not be done should be taken as an imperative to demonstrate how the confessional concerns of the tradition can be honored without resorting to the metaphysical doctrines it employs.

accurate Chalcedonian answer is the person who became Jesus of Nazareth.¹¹ The Christian confession is just an effort to specify the identity of Jesus. As it is possible to affirm contradictory statements about God, so long as those statements are temporally differentiated, it may be possible to affirm statements about Jesus that are contradictory of true statements about God, provided we specify how they are to be analyzed.

Granting that incarnation participates in temporal process has allowed us to understand how we can affirm the apparently contradictory statements “God is incarnate” and “God is not incarnate.” The first statement describes God’s present experience; the second statement describes God’s identity.¹² So there are two grounds for differentiating the subject of the predicates “not incarnate”/ “incarnate.” One is time. The other is identity. Understanding time requires us to understand identity as persistent through change. Furthermore, consideration of identity reveals that predicates describing a subject do not, ipso facto, define the identity of a subject.

Despite the host of logical and metaphysical issues that would require clarification for me to make anything like a full explication, never mind demonstration of the viability of the suggestion I am advancing, I hope it is intuitively apparent that by restricting the Chalcedonian confession to statements about the identity of Jesus, we open up some space for giving an account of how statements about Jesus might be true of him but not true of his identity. He could hold false beliefs, but God, whose identity he shares could not, since God’s knowledge is maximally great and cannot include error. It is

¹¹ Clearly, Jesus of Nazareth must be a designation picking out the person whose identity is the divine and human one confessed at Chalcedon. That designation did not connect to the identity of the creator at the time of the creation. But the same one who created is the one who became Jesus of Nazareth.

¹² To say that the incarnation does not describe the identity of God is just to say that history, in general, and the incarnation, in particular, are not necessary. God would be God were there no creation.

important to recognize Jesus *shares* divine identity.¹³ Just as identity persists through change and thereby is “sameness” in “difference,” so Jesus is the same as God, albeit also differing from God in the case under consideration in supposing error is knowledge.¹⁴ Identity then need not mean undifferentiated, i.e., identical. Identity, as I propose we use the term in speaking about Jesus, is the condition of the possibility of recognition. The Chalcedonian confession simply affirms that, in knowing Jesus, we recognize he is truly God. In other words, I am proposing that Chalcedon is best understood as an answer to the question, “Who is Jesus?” rather than as an answer to the question, “What is Jesus?” Consequently I shall make no attempt to specify what it is that constitutes the possibility of recognizing who he is.¹⁵

The Christological problem posed by Matthew 16:28, then, is this. Is it a mistake to suppose that we recognize God when we consider Jesus, given the fact that Jesus held at least one false belief? We do not need to conclude that it is a mistake, simply because we cannot ignore the fact we must make a statement about Jesus we cannot make about God. But if we do not conclude it is a mistake, then we will also have to show how epistemic error by the person Jesus is compatible with his identity as truly divine.

To reiterate, we can coherently use the concept of identity and make statements about a person that, if they were made about that person’s identity, would entangle us in

¹³ Saying he shares divine identity intends to note that he does not exhaust divine identity. Jesus is not the entirety of divinity.

¹⁴ We may also say that Jesus differs from the Father as the Son. This of course does not solve the problem of whether the Son can hold false beliefs. Space does not permit me to attempt integration of the suggestion here with trinitarian doctrine.

¹⁵ What one recognizes when one recognizes his divinity is however as clear as Anselm’s formula. But maximal greatness may not involve finite accessibility. So more is required in discussion of how Jesus is to be accurately recognized.

contradiction.¹⁶ But from this, it does not follow that we can make any statement whatever about a person that contradicts other statements that are true of a person's identity. The notion of identity would be vacuous if we could. Certainly, there are statements about a person's identity that foreclose their contradictions.¹⁷ And some statements about Jesus that might be made are, I would argue, impossible to reconcile with his identity. For example, Jesus sinned. He is impotent against evil. Death was the end of him, i.e. he is and will remain dead. Why, if we believe we can acknowledge his false belief and still affirm his shared identity with divinity, can we not deem hypothetical sin, or impotence over evil, or death as also compatible with that shared identity?

The general answer to our question is that, if it were the case some predicates such as the ones I have just expressed did in fact apply to Jesus, then it would be evident he could not save and it would be perverted to worship him. Here it is important to return to Anselm and note how his formula bears on the hope for salvation and the validity of worship. The reason God alone can save is that all other individuals and indeed the whole of the creation, because they are not maximally great, can neither control nor

¹⁶ It may be worth noting here that I have turned the customary practice in christological reflection upside down by proposing we say things about the person that cannot be said about the identity. It is customary to say things about the person "as" divine or "as" human that are not meant about the person as both, and I am always suspicious, therefore, that we have fallen into speaking of two persons where only one is to be seen. A fuller discussion of the issues imbedded in my topic would require clarification of whether we ought to speak of Jesus as having two identities or only one. So long as one is persuaded that it is logically possible to say that Jesus is truly divine and truly human, I'm not sure it is critical to answer the question whether he has two identities or one. But if identity means a set of attributes sufficient for individuation and differentiation from other individuals of a similar kind (assuming there is more than one individual of the relevant kind), then it would seem possible to affirm that Jesus has two identities and is nevertheless one person, because he would have two sets of attributes, either one of which would suffice for individuation.

¹⁷ It is more accurate to say that the reality which the identity statement picks out forecloses the possibility of incompatible states of affairs.

coordinate all finite individuals for the realization of perfection.¹⁸ If Jesus, the person were to have sinned, he would have increased the measure of evil and would stand in need of deliverance from that evil as surely as any sinner does.¹⁹ If Jesus the person were impotent over evil, then the victims of evil had nothing to hope for from him and the perpetrators of evil had nothing to fear from him. A dead Jesus need not be considered. So, to say that Jesus is divine is to say that he is the one who has the power of salvation. That power is incompatible with sin, impotence and death.²⁰

To worship is to offer unrestricted praise and unqualified submission. It is perverted to offer these gifts to any creature, including the whole of creation. The maximal greatness of divinity makes unrestricted praise fitting and unqualified submission necessary. To say that Jesus is divine is to say he merits unrestricted praise and unqualified submission. I take the primitive Christian confession that Jesus is Lord to be an instance of this quality of worship. But if Jesus sinned, we should have to

¹⁸ I take perfection to mean the perfection of desire. Since every non-divine individual is contingent, no necessity, even the necessity of inevitability, attaches to any individual. Therefore, evil of any kind is conceivably avoidable without any net loss of value. This remark is offered as a cryptic rebuttal of the “free will defense” likely to seem persuasive as an objection to divine “control.” It seems remarkable to me that Voltaire is so blithely ignored by those affirming the world as it is with freedom is better than a different world without evil. This “theodicy” seems to rest on two highly questionable assumptions, first, that the only possible divine relation to contingent being is a structural one. God can’t participate in his creation. God can only supply the conditions for creaturely existence. Second, it assumes freedom denied the possibility of evil exercise is not freedom. But creaturely freedom is clearly not infinite, so why would limitation with respect to evil be any more catastrophic for freedom than limitation with respect to the distance a creature can jump?

¹⁹ It should be noted I have not assumed that guilt is the problem sin poses for redemption. The sinlessness of Jesus is frequently deemed necessary so that he would be free of all guilt and could therefore take the guilt of others on himself. The problem of sin precedes the fact of guilt. Jesus can save because he has the power to do so, not because he is pure enough to do so. Evil rules that which makes common cause with it. Recall the story of Jesus’ temptation. He refused to cede power to Satan.

²⁰ In so far as sin is the power of death, resurrection exhibits power over both death and sin. Therefore, when the church affirms that Jesus is alive, it affirms that he has the power over sin, impotence/suffering, and death. The connection between the identity of Jesus and his biography of crucifixion and death might be expressed by saying that Jesus endured suffering and death. He was not overpowered by them. He did not make common cause with them. His identity manifests itself precisely in the impossibility of suffering and death to, as it were, “stick to” his person as predicates. The power of combining the notions of identity and temporality in attempting to reaffirm Chalcedon are especially evident to me on the matter of Jesus’ suffering and death.

criticize his sin. And if he were impotent in the face of evil, we should on those occasions have to choose other lords with brighter prospects of victory in the contest with evil.

My examples of predicates of the person Jesus that are excluded by his identity as truly divine make it clear that the notion of identity I am proposing can be given sufficient determination as to make identification possible.²¹ Jesus may be differentiated from other persons and may be recognized as sharing divine identity.

It remains for me to suggest how the specific predicate of false belief regarding the consummation of God's kingdom is compatible with his identity with God, whose maximal greatness includes only true belief.

If we consider the defect that spoils the rejected predicates, we will notice that it is not finitude. Jesus is finite.²² Consider impotence first and then sin. When Lazarus was sick in Bethany, Jesus wasn't there to heal him. But when he arrived, he was not impotent in the face of death. When Peter assumed Jesus' impotence before the mob in Gethsemane and drew his sword, Jesus declared the abundance of power under His control. The finite person Jesus' share in divine identity meant, in part, that in the sphere of his finitude, there was no power capable of achieving evil ends in opposition to him.²³ If no power could achieve an evil end in opposition to Jesus, then it could not co-opt him

²¹ I do not pretend that I have given it sufficient determination. What I have said does, I hope, imply that sufficient determination can be given. But to so determine the concept would require careful answers to most of the questions posed by Chalcedonian christology. I hope the few ideas expressed here will seem fruitful inspiration for attempting use of "identity" in what may be new ways.

²² I note here what I will emphasize below that the Chalcedonian definition is framed in the present tense. If Jesus is truly human he is finite. The harder problems of a Chalcedonian christology that I have not attempted to address in resolving the modest problem of Jesus epistemic error must be resolved in order to specify what is meant by saying Jesus is finite.

²³ Certainly some will recall the gospel record that Jesus "could not heal" in some localities because of the lack of faith in the inhabitants. I take this to be analogous to his free submission to the powers that killed him, a submission that he was fully capable of withholding. The sort of "incapacity" Jesus suffered from deficient faith in the needy deserves more comment than space permits.

in pursuit of evil ends either, merely because he was finite. Had Jesus sinned, it would not have been an inevitable consequence of his finitude. He would have surrendered his power to evil in common cause with it. Neither in reference to power over evil nor opposition to evil is finitude the defect that is incompatible with divine identity. Finitude that is capable of overpowering the evil it encounters and capable of refusing to make common cause with the evil that threatens to co-opt it is compatible with perfection, that is with maximal greatness.

But finitude has its liabilities. One of those liabilities is ignorance of its boundaries. I have taken it to be a fact that Jesus' finitude did result in his making errors out of ignorance. I believe I have shown how it is possible for us to say that Jesus the person held a false belief without having to say that God whose identity he shares participated in his ignorance. It follows, however, that the person Jesus *was* cannot be praised without restriction.²⁴ And so here I propose that we employ temporality again, not now to open the space between identity and person, but between the person who was and the person who is and who will be. It is important to note that the Chalcedonian definition is written in the present tense. The impossibility of unrestricted praise of the person Jesus *was* does not mean we must abandon the Chalcedonian assumption that Jesus is (present tense) to be worshipped, i.e. praised without restriction. And "appropriately worshipped" means truly divine. It is manifestly evident that Jesus no longer believes what he believed when he spoke the words reported in Matthew 16:28.²⁵ Our liturgical reservation is thereby suspended.

²⁴ The position I have taken that ignorance, unlike sin, is compatible with the divine identity means, however, that our praise of Jesus identity may in fact be unrestricted, even though we acknowledge the defect in his knowledge.

²⁵ Presumably, he quit making grammatical mistakes by the time he reached majority.

But does that mean time dissolved the Christological significance of his error?

The potential for the joint use of the concepts identity and temporality in affirming the faith of Chalcedon is perhaps most clearly grasped when we confront this question. As I have been concerned chiefly with a logical problem for affirming the true divinity and humanity of Jesus, I should like to note I am now raising a factual problem. The fact Jesus did not come in His kingdom in the lifetime of any of His contemporaries and, indeed, He has yet to come into that kingdom, seems to me to impose significant conditions on reaffirmation of Chalcedon. Reaffirmation can be undertaken only if we acknowledge the validity of present worship of Jesus (and hope for salvation by Him) is strictly contingent on His appearance in His Kingdom. If He were to fail to appear, that is to say if His epistemic error was not simply concerning *when* He would come into His Kingdom but *that* He would come into it at all, then we are mistaken in worshipping Him, and whatever hope we otherwise have for salvation is not a hope in Him. What is true of Jesus today is as much a function of what will be true of him in the future as his future is a function of his present. To see this problem is to marvel at the faith of Chalcedon given voice many generations after Jesus' erroneous declaration. Perhaps the basis of Athanasius's confidence in the resurrection of Jesus, expressed in "On the Incarnation of the Word," is an explanation of the faith of Chalcedon and a suggestion for the nurture of our own. He wrote,

"Or how, if he is no longer active (for this is proper to one dead) does he stay from their activity those who are active and alive, so that the adulterer no longer commits adultery, and the murderer murders no more, nor is the inflicter of wrong any longer grasping, and the profane is henceforth religious?...For where Christ is named, and his faith, there all idolatry is deposed and all imposture of evil spirits is exposed, and any spirit is unable to endure even the name, nay, even on barely hearing it, flies and

disappears. But this work is not that of one dead, but of one that lives—and especially of God.”²⁶

²⁶ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation of the Word*, in *Christology of the Later Fathers*, Edward Rochie Hardy ed., (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1954), pp. 84-85.