Getting That Model T Back On The Road: Thomas Flint On Incarnation And Mereology

William Hasker

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Thomas Flint claims that an argument of his seriously damages “Model T,” a mereological model of the incarnation. I contend that the argument fails, and that Model T remains viable.

In a recent essay Thomas Flint has criticized mereological models of the incarnation—models in which the relationships between the eternal divine person, the Son of God, and the Son’s human and divine natures, are interpreted in terms of part-whole relations.¹ In particular, he criticizes “Model T”;² he then goes on to consider another mereological model, Model A, as well as several non-mereological models. I take no position here on those other models, but I will argue that Model T is roadworthy as it stands.

According to Model T, Flint tells us, “the Son or Word of God (whom I’ll label W) takes on CHN [Christ’s human nature] as a part. This assumption results in a Son who combines both his original, divine substance (D) and his created human nature (CHN)” (71). But how are we to understand D? Not wanting to plunge into the difficulties of trinitarian theology, Flint proposes that “we view D as standing for the divine substance plus whatever properties or characteristics (e.g., being generated by the Father) distinguish the Son from the other two divine persons” (71). Henceforth, he will refer to D as the-divine-substance-plus-whatever. Since the incarnation is a contingent event, we can contrast a world Y, in which incarnation occurs, with a world N, in which there is no incarnation. Given this minimal machinery, Flint develops an argument (hereafter, Argument F), to show that Model T is untenable. Flint presents his argument as a special case of “a standard objection to mereological increase, sometimes called the growing argument, that is difficult to handle for mundane cases of


²So-called from Thomas Aquinas, who embraced the view, albeit with some hesitancy. There is also, it develops, an allusion to Henry Ford.
substances gaining parts and, as I see it, even harder to handle in the case of Model T” (72).³ The argument proceeds as follows:

(1) \( W \in Y = W \in N \).

This seems correct, because the same Son or Word exists in both of these possible worlds. But we can also assert

(2) \( W \in N = D \in N \).

This is so because “In worlds such as N . . . there are no parts to compose the Son other than the divine-substance-plus-whatever. In such worlds, then, it seems that the Son must be simply identical with D” (73). Furthermore,

(3) \( D \in N = D \in Y \).

D is itself a necessary being; it exists whether or not the Son becomes incarnate. But now we can infer

(4) \( W \in Y = D \in Y \).

“But,” says Flint, “(4) is clearly lethal to Model T. For that model insists that the incarnate Son is a composite being, one who is not identical with D, but rather has D as a proper part” (73).

If Model T is to be saved, then, it seems that at least one of the premises of Argument F must be discredited. (Another possibility, mentioned but not favored by Flint, would be to adopt relative identity theory and insist that identity, properly relativized, is not transitive.) Flint surveys a number of possible ways of rejecting one of the premises, ways that parallel typical responses to the “growing argument,” but concludes that none of them is very attractive. He concludes that “we have some reason to doubt Model T’s claim to offer us an accurate picture of what takes place in the incarnation. If Model T has survived the challenge posed by our puzzle at all, it’s more as a road-weary clunker than as the sleek, smooth-running model it originally appeared to be” (79).

Since Argument F is a special case of the growing argument, it comes as no surprise that formally identical arguments can be mounted to discredit the possibility that parts can be added to substances other than the divine Word. Here is one such argument, Argument F*: As it happens, the automobile I now drive does not have an external radio antenna; incoming programs are received through wires embedded in the car’s rear window. This works well enough most of the time, but it has sometimes occurred to me that in situations of marginal reception I might do better with an external antenna in addition to the one that is built-in. No doubt there is another possible world in which I drive the same car but have added such an external antenna. According to Model T*, in that world “my automobile Woofer (which I will label \( W^* \)) takes on the additional antenna (\( A^* \)) as a

part. This assumption results in a Woofer which combines both its original automotive substance (D*) and its new antenna (A*).” We will take D* to be whatever originally combined to make Woofer the automobile that it is—say, a body and an engine. Finally, let Y* be a world in which Woofer acquires the additional antenna, and N* be a world in which it does not. And now we are ready for Argument F*:

\[(1^*) W^* in Y^* = W^* in N^* \]
\[(2^*) W^* in N^* = D^* in N^* \]

This is so because “In worlds such as N* . . . there are no parts to compose Woofer other than D*. In such worlds, then, it seems that Woofer must be simply identical with D*.”

\[(3^*) D^* in N^* = D^* in Y^* \]

And now we can infer

\[(4^*) W^* in Y^* = D^* in Y^* . \]

“But,” says Flint*, “(4*) is clearly lethal to Model T*. For that model insists that in Y* Woofer is a composite being, one which is not identical with D*, but rather has D* as a proper part.” If Argument F* is successful, then, Model T* is logically impossible. However, it seems extremely plausible that Model T* is possible, and if so, something must be wrong with the argument.

The fact that an argument formally identical with Argument F can be used to demonstrate the impossibility of a situation that certainly seems to be possible strongly suggests that there is something wrong with Argument F itself. This does not, however, tell us what in particular is wrong with that argument. To get at that, let’s begin by asking once more, just what is the problem about the argument’s conclusion, (4)? It turns out that this depends on how we understand D, the Son’s original divine substance. The question that needs to be answered is this: Is D such that additional parts can be added to it, parts that then become part of D itself? If we assume an affirmative answer to this question, then plausibly D is simply identical with W, the Son or Word of God. (Isn’t that what we should expect, if we add to the divine substance whatever is distinctive of the Second Person of the Trinity?) But in that case, the conclusion (4) presents no difficulty; it simply asserts that the Son is identical with himself, which is hardly a surprise. To be sure, in Y the Son has assumed an additional part, namely CHN. But in Y so has D assumed an additional part; which is as it should be, since D just is the Son. On this reading, then, Argument F is sound, all right, but it creates no difficulty for Model T.

This way of understanding D, however, does not seem to be consistent with Model T, as Flint understands it, which “insists that the incarnate

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4I believe that a parallel move can be used to uncover the problems with Argument F*, but I will not develop that answer here.
Son is a composite being, one who is not identical with D, but rather has D as a proper part” (73). And given this, as Flint states, “(4) is clearly lethal to Model T” (73). For that model we must, then, assume (unlike the first interpretation), that D cannot have another proper part added to it, in addition to D itself. D thus understood cannot be identical with the substance which is the Son; it must rather be something else, something which cannot be augmented by the addition of parts. In this case (4) will certainly be false, for on this interpretation D, “the-divine-substance-plus-whatever” cannot possibly be identical with the Son, who includes CHN as a part in addition to D.

At this point, however, premise (2) comes into question. On the present interpretation, D cannot possibly be identical with the Son in any world, for the Son has the property of being such that an additional part (namely CHN) can be added to him, a property which by hypothesis is lacking to D. So the relationship between D and the Son, while doubtless intimate and important, cannot be that of identity. (My own proposal is that the divine nature constitutes the Son under certain conditions. But we can’t go into that here.5) On this reading, argument F is unsound, and poses no threat to Model T.

It should be said here that Flint considers the possibility of rejecting premise (2), and in that way avoiding the force of Argument F (see 74–77). After discussing several possible ways of doing this, he concludes “It seems, then, that none of our purported ways of discrediting (2) is easy to swallow. Since I know of no other means of impugning (2), we need to conclude, I think, that the advocate of Model T may well find it difficult to reject (2)” (77). Now, I acknowledge that, if we conclude that the Son cannot be identical with D in world N (nor, therefore, in any other world), we are left with the problem of explaining what the relation between the Son and D in fact is. And this may well present difficulties of the sort Flint enumerates. We have here something closely analogous to the problem of material constitution, and it is highly plausible that any solution to that problem will be counterintuitive in one way or another. (Human brains just are not hard-wired for modal logic.) I’ve indicated above my preference for a solution in terms of constitution, but I have not developed or defended that solution. But here is the point: For the purposes of the present article, I have no need to defend such a solution, nor do I need to answer the other objections posed by Flint. My purpose here is merely to defend Model T from Flint’s Argument F, and for this purpose it is sufficient to show that Argument F is unsound. And this I have done, by showing that, given the other assumptions in play here, premise (2) of Argument F cannot possibly be true. W, the divine Son is (according to Model T) such that a part can be added so as to become part of W. D, the divine-nature-plus-whatever, is such that no part can be added so as to become a part of D.

Since W and D differ in this modal property, W cannot be identical with D, in N or in any other world. This reasoning is rock-solid, and cannot be shaken by the objections posed by Flint.

To be sure, we might attempt to defend the identity in N of W and D by insisting that a person such as the Son cannot have a part added to him. But if we were to do that, we would render the argument circular and transparently question-begging.

We can conclude that Argument F fails; interestingly, it can fail in any of three different ways, depending on various assumptions that can be made. If D is the substance or person who is the Son, the argument is sound but innocuous; it poses no problem for Model T. If on the contrary D is such that no additional parts can become part of it, premise (2) is false and the argument is unsound. If, finally, we rescue premise (2) by insisting that the Son cannot add an additional part, the argument becomes circular and question-begging. But however this goes, the argument cannot do its job.

The owner of Model T has been sitting nervously in the office of the metaphysical garage, waiting for word about the condition of his pride and joy. When the mechanic enters from the shop area, we can tell from his expression that the news is good, even before he says, “There doesn’t seem to be anything wrong with it. Fill it up with gas, and you’re good to go.”

Huntington University

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