Is Model T Rattle-Free? A Reply to Hasker

Thomas P. Flint

Follow this and additional works at: https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy

Recommended Citation
DOI: 10.5840/faithphil201541338
Available at: https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol32/iss2/5

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.
IS MODEL T RATTLE-FREE? A REPLY TO HASKER

Thomas P. Flint

In “Getting that Model T Back on the Road: Thomas Flint on Incarnation and Mereology,” William Hasker contends that the reasons I offered for being dissatisfied with Model T, a mereological model of the incarnation, are insufficient. I argue, though, that Hasker’s defense of Model T is inadequate; though Christians may not want to consign it to the junkyard, they should at least be open to trading it in for a better model.

William Hasker’s “Getting that Model T Back on the Road” focuses on an argument I presented which cast doubt upon the model of the incarnation that I referred to as Model T.¹ On this model, the Son (W) takes on as a part the created body/soul composite (CHN) which is added to his divine-substance-plus-whatever (D) to form the incarnate Son. The argument (labeled Argument F by Hasker), a variation on a well-known traditional argument (sometimes called “the growing argument”) against the claim that things can add parts, compares a world in which the Son does become incarnate (Y) with one in which he doesn’t (N) and proceeds as follows:

(1) \( W \text{ in } Y = W \text{ in } N. \)
(2) \( W \text{ in } N = D \text{ in } N. \)
(3) \( D \text{ in } N = D \text{ in } Y. \)
(4) \( W \text{ in } Y = D \text{ in } Y. \)

Since (4) seems to follow from (1) through (3) and is inconsistent with Model T, the argument suggests, Model T needs to be surrendered—unless we can find plausible grounds for rejecting one or another of the premises. However, none of the typical grounds for denying any of (1) through (3), I argued, offers us a particularly palatable metaphysical picture of the

¹See William Hasker, “Getting that Model T Back on the Road: Thomas Flint on Incarnation and Mereology,” Faith and Philosophy 32, no. 2 (this issue), 172–176. Hasker (172) says that my argument is designed “to show that Model T is untenable.” This is a bit of an overstatement. My aim in presenting this argument was not to suggest that Model T is beyond the pale, but only that fully embracing it involves a higher cost than might initially be thought. More on this anon.
incarnation. Hence, I concluded, "we have some reason to doubt" the adequacy of Model T.²

Hasker begs to differ. A crucial question, he says, is whether or not D can have parts added to it. If it can, he says, then W is simply identical with D, and (4) is true but innocuous. If D can't take on new parts, he says, then D is clearly not identical with W (since the latter, according to Model T, does take on a new part in the incarnation), in which case (2) must be false. Either way, Model T is "good to go."³

Now, I don't think this is quite right. Whether or not D itself can take on new parts is not the issue. Model T insists that W in fact takes on a new part in the incarnation, and that D is only a proper part of the incarnate Son. But whether D can grow by adding a new part is a question on which Model T, as I understand it, is simply noncommittal. The whole point of Model T is that W has in fact "grown" by becoming incarnate; W has in fact added a part (namely, CHN). Whether or not D can grow is neither here nor there. So Hasker's approach here strikes me as off-base.

Still, there may well be something correct in Hasker's suggestion that rejecting (2) is the route that many Christians intent on maintaining Model T will find most plausible. After all, most Christians will presumably find (1) incontestable. (3) seems a tad less stable—as I point out, it could be rejected by one who thinks that D itself would cease to exist once CHN were added to it, even though D's components would continue.⁴ Still, the idea that the Son's divine-substance-plus-whatever ceases to be as a consequence of his becoming incarnate is likely to strike many Christians as simply too much to swallow. So for them, if (4) is to be avoided, as it needs to be for Model T to keep running, (2) needs to be surrendered.

And this, Hasker suggests, is all we need to say. True, Hasker acknowledges, there remains "the problem of explaining what the relation between the Son and D in fact is" such that (2) could turn out false. And yes, he agrees, I had argued in my earlier paper that all of the prominent metaphysical principles that might warrant a negative verdict on (2) are themselves beset with significant difficulties. But all of this, he maintains, is beside the point. For his purposes, he says, "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."⁵

Now, as I noted above, part of Hasker's case against (2) is based on the unwarranted assumption that because D does not gain parts on Model T, it cannot gain parts. Still, I believe that Hasker has a point (or at least half

---


³Hasker, "Getting that Model T Back on the Road," 176.

⁴For a fuller discussion of this point, see Flint, "Should Concretists Part," 77–78.

⁵Hasker, "Getting that Model T Back on the Road," 175.
a point) here. As we have seen, if the truth of (1) and (3), along with the viability of Model T, are among the “assumptions in play here,” then (2) is all that’s left; it has to be false, given our assumptions.

But is that really all that needs to be said? I think not. If one is going to offer a coherent overall theory of the incarnation using Model T, and if (1) and (3) are to be maintained, then one needs to be able to tell a story of how it is that W and D are related, a story that (among other things) justifies our rejection of (2). In my earlier paper, I examined the most-discussed means of discrediting the parallel to (2) in the generic growing argument: affirming distinct but mereologically coincident objects, or denying that numerical sameness entails identity, or saying that adding parts to an object results in the creation of a new thing—the part of the enlarged object that does not include the newly-added parts. (It is not without reason that Eric Olson calls this last option “the way of funny persistence conditions.”) While I admitted that each of these views is tenable, serious problems with each—especially when applied to the case at issue, the incarnation—were also discussed. If we find these problems serious enough—and I think many if not most Christians will—then the minimal Haskerian defense of Model T seems to me to be inadequate. Perhaps we can justifiably believe, as Hasker says, that there has to be something wrong with (2) for Model T to survive. But unless we can offer some credible account of just what is wrong with it, then our defense of that model can’t be seen as fully satisfactory.

A parallel might prove helpful here. Suppose an innocent orthodox theist were to be confronted for the first time with the following version of the deductive argument from evil.

(5) Evil (lots of it, or gratuitous instances, or horrendous examples—imagine the claim here being fully filled out in one way or another) exists.

(6) If an all-good, all-knowing, morally perfect God existed, there would be no evil (or not lots of it, or not gratuitous instances, or not horrendous examples).

Therefore,

(7) There is no all-good, all-knowing, morally perfect God.

Well, our imaginary theist says, I do indeed assume that (5) is true. But I also assume that there is a God who has the attributes affirmed by (7). So given the assumptions in play here, (6) is all that’s left; hence, it has to be false. The end.

Now, many of us would no doubt wish to see our innocent orthodox theist freed from the fetters of this atheological argument. Still, surely this

---

is a case of premature emancipation. Maybe our theist is right in thinking that (6) is the weak spot in the argument. But that recognition should be the beginning, not the end, of a response. Some explanation of why we should think (6) is not beyond reproach is called for here—a free will defense, or a greater goods defense, or a soul-building defense, or an appeal to our epistemic limitations, or something else. To the extent that (6) has some prima facie plausibility, and to the extent that nothing can be said to besmirch (6), or nothing at least that does not depend upon some highly questionable philosophical principle, our theist has not really come to grips with the atheological argument.

The same goes for the advocate of Model T when confronted with Argument F. Indeed, things here are even worse. For our innocent orthodox theist, there really is no alternative to denying (7). If (7) is true, the game is up, and not in a manner to our theist’s liking. But things are very different with regard to Argument F. If that argument succeeds, it’s not traditional theism that’s endangered. Indeed, it’s not even the doctrine of the incarnation. What falls is simply Model T. And Model T is merely one model among many which have been offered in attempts to illuminate the doctrine. So one would think that the failure to be able to offer a full and convincing justification for the denial of (2) should lead a reflective Christian at least to call that model into question.

For a non-philosophical parallel, consider the following story. Lieutenant Tennant is investigating a murder, and from the start considers Harpo the prime suspect. There are other possibilities—Groucho, Chico, and Zeppo all look suspicious—but Tennant is fairly confident it was Harpo. After a friendly five-hour interrogation at the police station, Harpo finally breaks his silence and signs a confession explaining how and why the murder took place. So Tennant is all but certain he has the true story of the crime (call this story T). But then his partner, Sergeant Striver, arrives at the station with new information. The murder was committed in Detroit at 7:00, but Striver has found witnesses who place Harpo in South Bend (enjoying duck soup at Sorin’s) at 6:00—and you can’t get from South Bend to Detroit in an hour. Clearly, this information seems to conflict with T. But Tennant is reluctant to surrender his theory. “We’re pretty confident about the time and place of the crime,” says Tennant to Striver. “And we know the distance between the two cities. But how about that South Bend alibi? I have a feeling it’s horsefeathers! Do I still like Harpo for the murder? You bet your life I do!” Obviously, there are many ways in which the alibi could prove to be bogus: the witnesses could be lying, or mistaken as to time, or place, or person. Suppose Tennant investigates the alibi, though, and discovers that none of these means of discrediting the witnesses is very plausible; he’d like to tell a story, consistent with all the evidence, that doesn’t place Harpo in South Bend at 6:00, but none of the possibilities he comes up with is truly credible. So what should Tennant do? Perhaps he’ll still hold Harpo on suspicion of murder. But given that there are other live candidates, shouldn’t his confidence in T
waver? At the very least, shouldn't he give Groucho, Chico, and Zeppo second looks?

Something akin to this, it seems to me, is true with Model T. Argument F doesn't prove (and was never intended to prove) that Model T needs to be abandoned. Nevertheless, that argument does suggest that a fleshed-out picture of the incarnation based on Model T ultimately depends upon one or another metaphysical thesis (relative identity, or distinct but mereologically coincident objects, or . . .) that is questionable when applied to the generic growing argument and even more questionable when applied to the incarnation. If there were no tenable alternatives to Model T, perhaps one would have no choice but to bite the bullet and embrace whichever of these theses one finds least unappealing in the case of the incarnation. But of course there are plenty of tenable (or at least seemingly tenable) alternative models—including habitus models, instrumental models, Model A, condensation models, and ownership models, to name just the five I considered in my earlier paper. What Argument F shows, I think, is that the costs associated with holding on to Model T are high enough that one should, at the very least, give those alternatives second looks.

Hasker concludes his paper by suggesting that a perspicacious metaphysical mechanic would tell his customer that Model T is just fine. I suspect, though, that the sound of telltale rattles are going to reappear soon after the driver leaves the shop. Perhaps the motorist will decide he can live with them. But if he's sensible, he should at least look around to see what else is available.

University of Notre Dame

---

8. Of course, one might also hold on to Model T by asserting that one or another of these theses must be true, but without actually affirming any particular one. Doing so absolves one of the problems associated with defending any of the specific theses, though at the cost of rendering one's model metaphysically rather hollow. In our detective scenario, it would be parallel to Tennant's deciding that one or another of the ways of discrediting Harpo's alibi must be true, even though Tennant finds none of those ways credible enough actually to defend. Would a prosecutor feel comfortable proceeding with such a case?


10. My commentary on Hasker's essay is deeply indebted to exchanges both with Hasker and with Joseph Jedwab.