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# CLASSICAL THEISM, CLASSICAL ANTHROPOLOGY, AND THE CHRISTOLOGICAL COHERENCE PROBLEM

Michael Gorman

The traditional claim that Christ is one person who is both divine and human might seem inconsistent with classical conceptions of understanding divinity and humanity. For example, the classical understanding of divinity would seem to require us to hold that divine beings are immaterial, while the classical understanding of humanity would seem to require us to hold that human beings are material, leaving us unable to speak consistently of one person who is divine and human both. This paper argues that revised versions of classical theism and classical anthropology can be developed, versions that avoid these problems.

## *Introduction*

According to classical Christology, as defined at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 and further clarified by later councils, Christ is one person with two natures, divinity and humanity. This claim might seem self-consistent at first glance, but there are reasons to worry that it ultimately leads to contradiction. The point can be explained using a pair of convenient examples. Consider, first, the following attractive pair of claims: “necessarily, every human being is material” and “necessarily, every divine being is immaterial.” If every human being is material, and if every divine being is immaterial, and if Christ is both human and divine, then Christ seems to be both material and immaterial. Second, consider “necessarily, every human being is contingent” and “necessarily, every divine being is necessary”; together with the claim that Christ is both human and divine, these imply, or at any rate seem to imply, that Christ is both necessary and contingent. Richard Cross labels this “the coherence problem” and describes it as “the fundamental philosophical problem specific to the doctrine [of the incarnation].”<sup>1</sup>

In this paper I propose a solution that involves rethinking the attractive claims mentioned just above. Finding the right way to do this is not easy. For example, rethinking “every divine being is immaterial” might seem to involve abandoning what is often referred to as “classical theism,”

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<sup>1</sup>Cross, “The Incarnation,” 453.



and rethinking “every human being is contingent” might seem to involve abandoning what might be called “classical anthropology.” My goal is to show that rethinkings are available that do not fall into these further troubles.

First, I sketch out the main lines of solution that have been proposed in the literature. Second, I restate the issue more formally and then give a preliminary indication of the direction that I will take. In the third, fourth, and fifth sections, I set out my proposal in detail. Sixth, I develop an extension to the proposal. Lastly, I indicate one of the proposal’s limitations.

### *Some Options*

A number of approaches have been taken in the literature; here I will follow Richard Cross’s recent typology.<sup>2</sup>

- (I) A first line of solution appeals to “reduplication and adverbial modifiers,” such as qua-phrases. Continuing with an example already given: instead of flatly saying, “Christ is immaterial” and “Christ is material,” one says, “Christ qua divine is immaterial” and “Christ qua human is material,” with the thought that these qualified statements do not lead to contradiction.<sup>3</sup>
- (II) A second line of solution appeals to relative identity theory, according to which a statement of the form “X is the same as Y” is incomplete—to be complete, such a statement must say not merely that X and Y are “the same” but instead spell out that they are, say, “the same person” or “the same dog” or something else. On this approach, one can say, in the case of the Trinity, that the Father and the Son are the same God but not the same person; likewise, then, in the case of the Incarnation, one can say that there is a divine being and a human being such that they are not the same being as each other, even though each is the same person as the other. Christ’s unity is maintained, on this account, by the fact that the divine being is the same person as the human being, while the fact that the divine being is a different being from the human being is meant to be sufficient for avoiding contradiction between the predicates belonging to them.
- (III) A third line of solution brings in mereological considerations to say that the contradictory predicates belong directly or proximately to different parts of Christ—to his different natures—and only indirectly or remotely to the whole person that these parts belong to. Because the predicates do ultimately belong to one person, Christ’s unity is maintained, but because they belong to him only indirectly, contradiction is avoided.

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<sup>2</sup>See parts 1–4 of Cross, “The Incarnation.”

<sup>3</sup>I develop one version of this approach in Gorman, “Christological Consistency and the Reduplicative Qua.”

(IV) The last line of solution that Cross outlines is one that he calls the “restriction” approach. The idea is to restrict one’s notion of humanity or divinity by denying that humanity involves all that it is normally thought to involve, or that divinity involves all that it is normally thought to involve. If one’s notion of humanity or divinity is restricted in the right way, there is no pressure to attribute contradictory properties to a being that is both divine and human.

Obviously this provides only a sketch; the views mentioned come in different varieties. What’s more, they may overlap: for example, the mereological ideas in (III) can be used to give content to the reduplicative phrases in (I).<sup>4</sup>

With all this to provide a framework, let me turn now to a discussion of the solution that I here put forward.

#### *The Strategy of this Paper*

I have just sketched out four different approaches. The solution that I will be proposing is most easily thought of as a variation on the fourth, and I will begin by simply presenting it in that way. But because space does not permit adequate discussion of the other approaches, I will not be claiming here that my approach is superior to all the others; I will instead make only the more modest claim that it is a strong approach that deserves serious consideration.

Let me begin by giving a slightly more formal statement of the problem itself. First, there is a pair of “every” claims, as follows: where no being can be both F and G, necessarily every divine being is F, and necessarily every human being is G.<sup>5</sup> Second, there is the Chalcedonian claim that Christ is both divine and human. (I note in passing that the problem as formulated starts with the idea that Christ is, so to speak, “already” both divine and human, without engaging the question of how he might have become incarnate in the first place; this point will come up again near the end of the paper.)

Now as we saw above, the fourth line of solution avoids contradiction by re-thinking what divinity requires, or what humanity requires, or both—in short, by abandoning one of the “every” claims. So, for example, to avoid saying that Christ is both material and immaterial, one could deny that every human being is material, or one could deny that every divine being is immaterial; denying both would work too, but in the absence of independent reasons for doing so, it seems like overkill. Likewise, to avoid saying that Christ is both necessary and contingent, one could

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<sup>4</sup>Sophisticated versions of mereological-reduplication approach are developed, as interpretations of Thomas Aquinas, in Stump, *Aquinas*, 411–413 and Cross, *The Metaphysics of the Incarnation*, 195–198. For doubts about these readings of Aquinas, see Gorman, *Aquinas on the Metaphysics of the Hypostatic Union*, chapter six.

<sup>5</sup>The modal operators should be taken in a wide-scope sense. I will, for ease of exposition, sometimes leave them unexpressed.

deny that every human being is contingent, or that every divine being is necessary, or both; although again, denying both seems like overkill in the absence of independent reasons for doing so.

Assuming that one has no reason to deny both of a pair of “every” claims, how does one decide which to deny? In a large range of cases, deciding is not difficult. For example, the entire Christian story (as standardly understood) turns on Christ’s having been physically present in Jerusalem and other nearby places, on his having engaged in normal physical activities such as walking and eating, and on his dying. If we take it that having a body is sufficient for “being material,” then it is obvious that Christ is material, and therefore it would be wrong to respond to the coherence problem by denying that every human being is material.<sup>6</sup> Instead, the path to take would be to deny that every divine being is immaterial, i.e., lacking a body. Or, to consider the other example, the entire Christian story (as standardly understood) turns on its being the case that Jesus is none other than the Second Person of the Trinity, “begotten of the Father before all ages,” and therefore a necessary being. So in this case, the path to take is to deny that every human being is contingent.

Now as noted already, it can seem that if we deny claims like “every divine being is immaterial” and “every human being is contingent,” then we are abandoning classical theism and classical anthropology. Cross, for example, when discussing with approval the fourth line of solution, says that “we need to modify . . . our classical understanding of the divine nature”; this suggests that we need to substitute a non-classical understanding for the classical one. However, he also says that we need to accept “an abandonment of a strong form of classical theism”; this suggests that there may be stronger and weaker forms, both of them legitimately “classical,” although he does not explain what this might mean.<sup>7</sup> What I will be proposing in this paper can be thought of along the latter lines. My goal, in short, is to show that by developing more moderate versions of the “every” claims, we can avoid contradiction without abandoning classical theism and classical anthropology.

But first let me point out that we can examine these questions without being in possession of a perfectly clear conception of what classical theism and classical anthropology require. Some properties are indisputably part of the classic conception of divinity, even if others are somewhat controversial, and likewise, *mutatis mutandis*, for the classic conception of human nature. We do not need to know, for every property, whether or not it is part of the classical conception of divinity or humanity in order to know that being immaterial is part of the classical conception of divinity, and likewise, that being contingent is part of the classical conception of

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<sup>6</sup>Depending on what one thinks about the status of the separated soul after death, one might doubt that every human being is material. But this kind of doubt is not relevant here; even if some humans are, in some sense, non-material, such was surely not true of Christ during his sojourn on earth, nor is it the case now, after his resurrection.

<sup>7</sup>For the quotations from Cross, “The Incarnation,” 464, 471.

humanity. If contradictions arise between properties that belong to the classical conceptions' indisputable cores, that is enough to create the coherence problem and to require us to look for possible solutions.

### *Divine Immateriality and Classical Theism*

Let us begin by considering the issue of restrictionism and classical theism, and for ease of presentation, let us continue using the example of immateriality. To maintain the Chalcedonian claim, we are going to deny one of the "every" claims, and it seems clear that the one to deny is the claim that necessarily, every divine being is immaterial. If we want to deny that claim while retaining classical theism, then we need to understand classical theism in such a way that it does not imply that every divine being is immaterial. But it is not immediately obvious what that would look like. Classical theism involves a close connection between divinity and immateriality, and any proposed way of understanding classical theism that did not acknowledge this connection would be classical theism in name only.

The point can be put differently. If we simply deny that every divine being is immaterial, and do nothing else, we will have made space for saying that Christ is material. That's good news to the extent that what we now say about divinity and immateriality will not lead to contradiction. But simply to deny that every divine being is immaterial is consistent with affirming that every divine being is material and even with affirming that every divine being is necessarily material. In short, merely denying that every divine being is immaterial says so little that it is consistent with an altogether non-classical conception of God.

To retain classical theism, then, we need to retain a serious and close connection between divinity and immateriality. So while I will deny that classical theism must say that every divine being is immaterial, I will affirm that classical theism must make a similar-sounding claim—one with which the first is easily confused. In short, I will be distinguishing between the claim that every divine being is immaterial and another, related claim, and the other claim will be the real connection between divinity and immateriality, a connection still strong enough to count as a form of classical theism.

Let us begin by noting that there is a difference between saying that a certain being is divine and saying that it is solely divine. On standard Christian theology, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are all divine, but only the Father and the Spirit are *solely* divine, i.e., in possession of divinity but no other nature—the Son is divine indeed, but human as well. Being divine is importantly different from being solely divine: a being that is solely divine might lack a feature that a being that was both divine and human could have.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>This distinction I am making here might call to mind Thomas Morris's distinction between being fully human and being merely human. However, even apart from the changes that would have to be made to account for the obvious difference between humanity and divinity, there is reason to refrain from saying that Morris's fully/merely distinction is just

With this in hand, we can distinguish two claims about the connection between divinity and immateriality:

Necessarily, every divine being is immaterial.

Necessarily, every *solely* divine being is immaterial.

We said above that we should abandon the claim that every divine being is immaterial. The claim that every solely divine being is immaterial is, however, importantly different. On one hand, it is a claim that does not lead to Christological contradiction. Saying that every solely divine being is immaterial does not imply that Christ is immaterial, because Christ is not solely divine; therefore, it leaves open the door to saying that Christ is material. On the other hand, the “solely” claim maintains a serious connection between divinity and immateriality. It implies, for instance, that God the Father and God the Holy Spirit are immaterial. It also implies that apart from the incarnation, God the Son would be immaterial. It says, in a nutshell, that anything that is divine and has no other nature will be immaterial.

That is clearly a non-trivial claim about divinity. And my suggestion is that it is enough to give us a form of classical theism, one claiming not that every divine being is immaterial, but, more carefully, that every *solely* divine being is immaterial. Non-classical theism would deny any connection between divinity and immateriality—it would deny both the claim that every divine being is immaterial and the claim that every solely divine being is immaterial. “Strong” classical theism would affirm both claims. “Moderate” classical theism would deny the first but affirm the second. It is still clearly a form of classical theism, because it still holds to a close connection between immateriality and divinity. Only if something divine acquires a second nature can it be material; if the person in question has a divine nature and no other, immateriality is guaranteed.

I can make my proposal clearer by distinguishing it from one that is similar but still distinct. Thomas Senor has suggested that we rethink the precise nature of some of the properties that are standardly thought of as divine attributes. Applied to the example under discussion in this paper here, his proposal would be that instead of saying that immateriality is essential to every divine person, we should say that it is a *ceteris paribus* property of every such person.<sup>9</sup> While in practice Senor’s proposal

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the same as the distinction I am proposing here. As Michael Durrant has emphasized, the “fully” notion as Morris presents it has a quantitative character: a being is fully human just in case it possesses all the qualities necessary for being human. One should at least pause before supposing that possessing all the qualities on a certain list is the same thing as belonging to a qualitatively distinct kind. Durrant finds in this a fatal confusion in Morris’s analysis; without passing judgment on that, this seems to me reason enough to distance myself from Morris. See Morris, *The Logic of God Incarnate*, 66; Durrant, “The Logic of God Incarnate—Two Recent Metaphysical Principles Examined,” 121–127.

<sup>9</sup>See Senor, “God, Supernatural Kinds, and the Incarnation,” esp. 358 and 362, and also Senor, “Incarnation, Timelessness, and Leibniz’s Law Problems,” 227.

and mine would probably yield the same results, I find some difficulties with his way of construing matters. For one thing, his proposal leaves important things rather vague: what are the relevant “other things” that need to stay the same for immateriality to belong to a divine being? For another thing, the very notion of a *ceteris paribus* property might be at least questionable; of course it would make sense to predicate “immaterial *ceteris paribus*” of God, but is there really a *property* corresponding to this predicate? Although I do not want to take a stand here on just how sparse our conceptions of properties should be, it’s worth noting that Senor’s proposal does put an important limit on how sparse we can go.

My proposal, at any rate, is different from this. What I am suggesting is that the property in question is none other than the ordinary straightforward property of immateriality—not “immateriality *ceteris paribus*” or “immateriality in the standard case” or anything like that. Christological contradiction is being avoided not by rethinking which property should be attributed, but rethinking what the property should be attributed to: immateriality, of the ordinary sort, should be attributed not to all divine beings, but to all solely divine beings. So what makes moderate classical theism different from strong classical theism is not the properties that it thinks of as being divine, but what beings it is willing to attribute them to.

Aristotelianism is plausibly taken as an example of strong classical theism. Theoretically, to be sure, we might imagine that if Aristotle encountered the idea of the Incarnation, he would say, “Well, yes, now that you mention it, I see that it is possible for God to become incarnate; I guess all the things I’ve said about divine beings were about *solely* divine beings, although of course I never thought to put it that way.” But it seems to me more plausible to suppose that if Aristotle encountered the idea of the Incarnation, he would say, “No, that’s absurd; every divine being is immaterial, and I really mean that. There’s just no possibility for something to take on a second nature.”

But what about classic Christian thinkers, like Aquinas? Should we understand them as holding strong classical theism or moderate classical theism? They go to great lengths to insist on divine immateriality, and one is hard-pressed to think of passages where they add in provisos along the lines of “Of course I mean all this to apply only to *solely* divine beings.” This suggests strong classical theism as the most natural reading. On the other hand, the fact that such authors do not include such provisos is not decisive in and of itself. If someone like Aquinas held moderate classical theism, he wouldn’t necessarily mention it every time he spoke of divinity. In giving a description of the divine nature, it would be extremely tedious and pedantic always to be saying not “God is immaterial” but “God—apart from the Incarnation, of course—is immaterial.” Such a qualification could, should, and would normally be left unstated. Someone who held moderate classical theism might well say “every divine being is immaterial” even if his official position, strictly stated, was that every *solely* divine being is immaterial. Only when questions of the Incarnation were in the



air would it be necessary to add that qualification. Most of the time, they are not in the air, so most of the time, one can proceed without the qualification.<sup>10</sup>

From this, of course, it does not follow that authors like Aquinas held moderate classical theism rather than strong classical theism. It follows only that the *prima facie* case that they don't hold it is defeasible. Settling the question lies outside the scope of this paper. All I am claiming here is (a) that moderate classical theism can be used as part of a solution to the Christological coherence problem, and (b) that moderate classical theism is legitimately thought of as a version of classical theism; unlike the simple abandonment of the connection between divinity and immateriality, it allows us to maintain a robust connection between them.

### *Human Contingency and Classical Anthropology*

If our task in the preceding section was to find a substitute for the bald claim that every divine being is immaterial, our task in this section is to find a substitute for the bald claim that every human being is contingent. The basic move is the same. Moderate classical anthropology, I propose, would say not that every human being is contingent, but that every solely human being is contingent. Christ, because he is not solely human, is not a counterexample to this claim, so incoherence is avoided. At the same time, we retain a close connection between the notion of contingency and that of humanity, strong enough to give us a legitimate version of classical anthropology: if human nature only is involved, then contingency is guaranteed. The only way for there to be a necessarily existing human will be for a necessarily existing person to assume a human nature.

So far, there has been a strong parallelism between the problem of reconciling the Chalcedonian claim with classical theism and the problem of reconciling the Chalcedonian claim with classical anthropology. But there is an important non-parallel that is worth remarking on, even if it is not essential to the argument of this paper. Starting with divinity, we can affirm both of the following: (a) it is possible not only for there to be a being that is solely divine, but also for there to be a being that is both divine and human; (b) it is possible for a being that is solely divine to come to be both divine and human. However, things are otherwise when we start with humanity. It is true to say (a\*) it is possible not only for there to be a being that is solely human, but also for there to be a being that is both divine and human. But it is false to say (b\*) it is possible for a being that is solely human to come to be both divine and human. A

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<sup>10</sup>For what seems like a qualification of the sort I am proposing, precisely in a Christological context, see the following passage from Cyril of Alexandria's dialogue *On the Unity of Christ*: "So even if he is said to be wearied by the journey (Jn 4:6), to have hungered (Mt 4.2), and to have fallen asleep (Mt 8:24), would it be proper, tell me, to attribute these things which are petty and demeaning to God the Word?"—"Such things would not at all be fitting to the Word, if we considered him *nakedly* [γυμνῶ], as it were, not yet made flesh" (emphasis mine). See Cyril of Alexandria, *On the Unity of Christ*, 107; for the Greek text, see Cyril of Alexandria, *Deux dialogues Christologiques*, 448.

solely divine person can acquire a human nature, but—at least according to classical Christology—a solely human person cannot acquire a divine nature. And this non-parallelism points to another. The point of saying that every solely divine being is immaterial, rather than saying merely that every divine being is immaterial, is to allow for the possibility of a divine person's becoming material. The point of saying that every solely human being is contingent, rather than saying merely that every human being is contingent, is not to allow for the possibility of a human being's becoming necessary, but rather to allow for the possibility of a necessarily existing person to become human.

*Summary to this Point, and a Note about Controversial Cases*

Up to now I have mostly laid out my proposal in terms of specific examples. It would be helpful to set it out in a more general form. Christ is divine and human. If it seems that every divine being has a certain feature F and that every human being has a certain feature G such that nothing can have both F and G, the proposed way forward is to drop one of the "every" claims and to replace it with an "every solely" claim. That Christ is neither solely divine nor solely human is enough to escape the threat of contradiction between F and G; that we still have the "every solely" claim is enough to maintain a form of classical theism or classical anthropology.

Much earlier, when explaining the restrictionist approach that this paper's own proposal grows out of, I said that it is typically easy to know whether one should restrict one's notion of divinity or instead one's notion of humanity, and the examples I focused on were meant to exemplify this ease. Deciding is also usually easy in the modified restrictionist strategy that forms the core of this paper's own proposal. While in theory we could have solved the problem of immateriality by abandoning strong classical anthropology's claim that every human being is material and embracing instead a moderate classical anthropology according to which every solely human being is material, that seems ridiculous and even heretical: Christians should not defend Christ's divinity by saying that he had no body. Likewise, in theory we could have solved the problem of necessity by embracing a moderate classical theism according to which every solely divine being is necessary, but that too seems ridiculous and even heretical: Christians should not defend Christ's humanity by saying that he, the incarnate Word, was a contingent being.<sup>11</sup>

It should nonetheless be granted that in at least some cases, it will be less obvious which "every" claim needs modification. Consider omniscience. This can be treated as a problem having the same structure as the ones already considered. It seems that every divine being is omniscient, that every human being is non-omniscient, and that Christ is both divine

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<sup>11</sup>Robin Le Poidevin explores the possibility that the Word became contingent. I am not persuaded by his suggestion, but for present purposes, all we need to note is that the sense of contingency and necessity he is working with there is not the standard one in play here. See Le Poidevin, "Kenosis, Necessity and Incarnation."

and human. One can solve this problem by denying that every human being is non-omniscient and asserting instead that every solely human being is non-omniscient; in other words, one can retain strong classical theism about omniscience and adopt moderate (rather than strong) classical anthropology about (non-)omniscience. That, it seems safe to say, would be the more traditional type of solution. But if one were inclined to take a kenotic approach to Christology, one might want to say that Christ, on becoming human, emptied himself of his omniscience and became non-omniscient instead: on this account, one would retain strong classical anthropology about (non-)omniscience and instead adopt moderate classical theism about omniscience. From a purely logical point of view, either of these solutions is sufficient for avoiding contradiction; choosing between them would be a matter of deciding which gave the better account of divinity, human nature, and Christ himself.<sup>12</sup> Although I myself would favor the more traditional approach over the kenotic approach, I do not think the kenotic approach should be dismissed without careful analysis. So although it is sometimes fairly easy to decide how precisely to deploy the strategy on offer in this paper, sometimes it is not. For present purposes, it doesn't matter, because knowing that one or the other option is available is enough to know that contradiction can be avoided.

*An Extension to Anti-Dispositional Properties*

I have proposed "moderate" versions of classical theism and classical anthropology, versions according to which we should say, for instance, that every solely divine being is immaterial and that every solely human being is contingent. But it is worth noting that "immaterial" and "material," and likewise "necessary" and "contingent," are occurrent rather than dispositional properties. Does the strategy I have been developing apply to dispositional properties too?

For example, what if, instead of thinking about divine immateriality, we were to think about divine immortality? Every divine being is immortal, and Christ is divine, but also Christ is (or was) mortal. If we follow the strategy as proposed so far, we will try to avoid incoherence by denying that every divine being is immortal, and then we will try to save classical theism by affirming that every solely divine being is immortal.

But, it could be objected, this will not work. First, note that mortality is a dispositional property: to be mortal is to be able to die. Likewise, immortality is what might be called an anti-dispositional property; to be

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<sup>12</sup>There is, it is worth noting, an important non-parallelism between the two possible solutions. The advocate of kenoticism about knowledge needs to hold that Christ has no omniscient cognitive powers. The advocate of the more traditional approach could hold that even while retaining his (divine) omniscient cognitive powers, Christ, by becoming incarnate, acquires (human) non-omniscient cognitive powers; i.e., Christ can have two sets of cognitive powers, one omniscient and the other not. Spelling this out would lead us too far afield, but for some details, see Gorman, "Personal Unity and the Problem of Christ's Knowledge."

immortal is to be unable to die.<sup>13</sup> Second, note that every human being is mortal.<sup>14</sup> Third, note that before the Son actually became human, he was able to become human, which means that before he became human, he was able to be able to die. Fourth, it seems that to be able to be able to die just is to be able to die. From these four premises it would follow that the Son was mortal even before the Incarnation. And if Aquinas is right that any divine person is able to become incarnate,<sup>15</sup> it would also follow that every divine person is mortal, even divine persons who are, even now, solely divine. Therefore, according to this objection, one must not only abandon “every divine being is immortal” but also “every solely divine being is immortal.” At that point, however, classical theism would truly have been abandoned.

The objection can be presented differently. When occurrent properties were substituted for F and G in the “every” claims, the strategy of using the moderate versions of those claims, rather than the strong versions of those claims, seemed to work well: a strong claim was rejected, thereby avoiding contradiction, and a moderate claim was put in its place, thereby saving classical theism (or classical anthropology). But when dispositional or anti-dispositional properties are substituted for F and G, things seem not to work out. If every human being is mortal, and if every divine being either is human or is able to become human, then every divine being is mortal, even if solely divine. Cases like these, then, make it seem that avoiding contradiction requires the total abandonment of classical theism.

It turns out, however, that the strong/moderate distinction can still make a contribution, as long as we make a further distinction. Christ, because he is both divine and human, has a nature that allows him to die. The Father, because he is solely divine, has no such nature—what he has instead is the ability to assume such a nature. The Father’s ability to die, then, is more remote than the Son’s is. The incarnate Son can die without acquiring a new nature, but the Father cannot (just as the pre-incarnate Son could not); the Father would have to assume a new nature in order to gain the dispositional property of mortality.

So there is a distinction among different senses of mortality. Let us say that a being is “proximately mortal” if it already has a nature in virtue of which it can die, and that a being is “remotely mortal” if it is not proximately mortal but is still able to assume a nature in virtue of which it could die. Finally, let us say that a being is “broadly mortal” if it is either remotely mortal or proximately mortal. Socrates, and Christ after the Incarnation,

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<sup>13</sup>This is in fact not a sufficient condition of immortality, or else rocks would be immortal. To be immortal, not only do you need to be unable to die, you also need to be alive in the first place. I will not always say this in what follows.

<sup>14</sup>Perhaps it will be said that post-resurrection humans are not mortal. But this way of weakening “every human being is mortal” is not relevant here, because the fact that Christ had a pre-resurrection phase of life during which he was mortal is sufficient to create the coherence problem.

<sup>15</sup>Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* III, q. 3, art. 5.

are proximately mortal, but God the Father is remotely mortal. Thus it is misleading to just say flatly that Socrates, Christ, and God the Father are all mortal. They are all of them broadly mortal, to be sure, but the way in which Socrates and Christ are mortal is very different from the way in which the Father is mortal. To repeat, Socrates and Christ are proximately mortal, whereas the Father is only remotely mortal.

These distinctions can help us talk about immortality in a more articulated way. Immortality comes in two strengths. Weak immortality means (being alive and) not having a nature that allows for death—in other words, it means not being proximately mortal. Strong immortality means not even being *able* to have a nature that allows for death—in other words, not being remotely mortal. Angels, perhaps, are strongly immortal, if Aquinas is right that only a divine person can acquire a new nature.<sup>16</sup> But the Incarnation shows us that divine persons are, at most, weakly immortal.

I have just said that if Aquinas is right that only a divine person can acquire a new nature, then angels are strongly immortal, whereas solely divine beings are only weakly immortal. One might object that this cannot possibly be correct, because it would imply that angels are superior to solely divine beings like God the Father. In response, consider first the contrast between angels and proximately mortal beings like humans. Humans can die because they have a nature that is weak in a certain way—it is subject to dissolution. Angels, being immaterial, lack this weakness and cannot die; their natures are sturdy enough that death does not threaten them. This makes angels ontologically stronger than solely human beings. But now compare angels not to humans but to solely divine beings. Solely divine beings, at least on Aquinas's account, have a power that angels do not have: the power to acquire a second nature. Their being weakly immortal is a function of this power, and not a function of any weakness in the divine nature itself. In short, the divine nature is so strong that a solely divine person, unlike an angel, can actually acquire an additional nature—a nature that is susceptible to death. So the fact that God the Father or God the Spirit is (remotely) able to die is not a sign of divine weakness, but a sign of divine strength.

Returning now to the main point: to preserve classical theism, we need a link between divinity and immortality. We should not say that every divine being is immortal in either the strong or the weak sense, because Christ is divine and yet he is mortal. Should we say that every *solely* divine being is immortal? If that means strong immortality, then no, but if it means weak immortality, then yes. Every solely divine person is weakly immortal, i.e., it is alive, and it is not in possession of a nature that permits death, but it is still capable of acquiring one. That is enough of a connection between immortality and divinity to preserve classical theism; meanwhile, the objection is given its due by the concession that every solely divine person is remotely mortal (and thus only weakly immortal).

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<sup>16</sup>See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* III, q. 3, a. 1, ad 2.

Not only is classical theism saved, but also contradiction is avoided. With all the relevant distinctions in place, we end up with a set of consistent propositions such as the following:

Christ is human.

Every human being is proximately mortal (and, *a fortiori*, broadly mortal).

Christ is proximately mortal (and, *a fortiori*, broadly mortal).

Christ is divine.

Every divine being is broadly mortal.

Christ is (again) broadly mortal.

Christ is not solely divine.

Every solely divine being is weakly immortal.

Christ is not weakly immortal.

Christ could be solely divine.

If Christ were solely divine, he would be weakly immortal.

It is possible for Christ to be human.

Christ is not strongly immortal.

We feel ourselves to be in difficulties only when the propositions we are entertaining are insufficiently articulated—for example, when we speak of what is divine without specifying whether it is divine or just solely divine, and when we speak of what is mortal or immortal without specifying whether it is proximately mortal or remotely mortal, weakly immortal or strongly immortal.

#### *A Limitation of this Approach*

As already noted, the problem that this paper addresses starts from the assumption that Christ is both divine and human and asks whether contradictions follow from this claim when it is taken together with certain classical claims about divinity and humanity. But that is not the only way in which the threat of contradiction can arise in Christology.

What I have in mind is best brought out by way of a contrast. Consider a worry that this paper's proposal is equipped to handle. Classical theists have often claimed that divine persons are atemporal, but it certainly seems like a part of classical anthropology to hold that humans are temporal; applying both of these ideas to the divine-and-human Christ seems to yield the contradiction that Christ is both temporal and atemporal. Using the strategy set out in this paper, we can say that although a *solely* divine person would have to be atemporal, a divine person that was also human could be temporal. In short, assuming that Christ is human,

choosing moderate classical theism about temporality enables us to avoid contradicting ourselves. But this still leaves open the question of how the divine Christ became human in the first place. Isn't *becoming human* itself a temporal process, and wouldn't Christ therefore have had to be *already* temporal, *before* he became human, in order to be able to become human?<sup>17</sup> This argument challenges classical theism's ideas about divine atemporality on the basis of the Incarnation. The challenge is an important one that most definitely deserves an answer. But it is a different question from the one we are discussing in this paper. This paper has been concerned with how to avoid contradictions that seem to follow from the assumption that Christ is both divine and human; that's different from wondering whether it is legitimate to suppose that anything divine became human in the first place. So the strategy I am proposing in this paper is not a panacea for all Christological ills. There is no such panacea. The overall project of defending classical Christology is large and complex, and it is unrealistic to suppose that any one strategy can address all worries that might arise from the doctrine.

### Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that using the distinction between being divine (or human) and being solely divine (or human), and also the remotely/proximately distinction, gives us a way to resolve apparent incoherencies that fit a certain pattern, namely, the inconsistent trio of the Chalcedonian claim and two "every" claims. Whether this is the best strategy for resolving such apparent incoherencies, and how one might go about solving distinct problems, are questions that will have to await another occasion.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>See Senor, "Incarnation and Timelessness," 149–164.

<sup>18</sup>I am grateful for suggestions from referees and editors, as well for an Analytic Theology Summer Stipend from the John Templeton Foundation and the Center for Philosophy of Religion at the University of Notre Dame.

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