

Omniscience as a Dispositional State

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Some passages of Scripture present a *prima facie* problem for Christianity. They suggest that Jesus did not know certain propositions. In one passage Jesus tells his disciples that there will come a time when the heavens and the earth will pass away but then says “Of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (Mark 13:32). This seems to be a confession of ignorance as to when this end will come. In another passage, it is said that Jesus learned as a child and grew in wisdom (Luke 2:52). These passages suggest that Jesus was not omniscient. If Jesus was not omniscient, then Jesus could not have been fully divine.

A popular strategy for solving this problem is to provide a consistent account of the Incarnation. If we can explain how it is that Jesus is fully human and fully divine, then perhaps something in that account will also give us the resources to explain why Jesus seems to lack knowledge in some circumstances.

In the first two sections of this paper, I try to motivate pursuing a different strategy. In the third section, I offer that strategy. I will defend a definition of omniscience that solves this problem.

The Kenotic Theory

One attempt to make sense of these passages relies on the kenotic theory of Incarnation. Proponents of this theory solve the problem by saying that Jesus temporarily *emptied* himself of certain divine properties during his Incarnate life. This would account for his apparent lack of omniscience in certain passages of Scripture.

But kenotic Christology faces this problem: If Jesus temporarily loses his omniscience, then he temporarily loses his divinity since omniscience is an essential property of being divine. So the kenotic theory seems to entail that Jesus was not truly divine.

Ronald Feenstra offers a solution. He claims that omniscience *simpliciter* is not essential to being divine. A more complex property is required. In attempting to defend kenotic Christology, he considers three candidate properties that might replace omniscience *simpliciter* as an essential divine property.

- (1) Omniscience-unless-freely-choosing-to-be-otherwise
- (2) Omniscience-unless-kenotically-incarnate
- (3) Omniscience-unless-kenotically-and-redemptively-incarnate.¹

But this is where the problem begins. These property candidates are all disjunctive properties. There are several problems with disjunctive properties. I will discuss one.

Properties are supposed to account for similarity between objects. That is one of the primary motivations for admitting properties into our ontology. One of the nice features about the property red is that it accounts for some of the similarity between red things. Disjunctive properties do not account for similarity between things. Let us consider the disjunctive property being-red-or-square. If this is a property, many dissimilar things have it. Strawberries have the property being-red-or-square in virtue of their being red. My computer screen has the property being-red-or-being-square in virtue of its being square. But what similarity is there between my computer screen and strawberries? If disjunctive properties are real entities, then properties do not really account for the similarities between objects. But that is precisely what we think properties should do.

Now one might note that we apparently make use of disjunctive properties often in our discourse. A parent has the property being-male-or-female. Nothing ridiculous is posited there. When a pitcher pitches a baseball it makes sense to say that the ball has the property of being-a-ball-or-a-strike. If the batter makes contact, the ball has the property being-foul-or-fair. Someone might ask, What is wrong with these sentences? They are true, aren't they?

This kind of reasoning assumes that we need these disjunctive properties to be the truth-makers of sentences with disjunctive predicates. But we should be careful not to assume that all predicates necessarily indicate that there is a property. A disjunctive predicate needs no disjunctive property to make it true. When we say that someone is male or female only one of two things needs to be the case; that the person have the property of being a male or that the person have the property of being a female. When we say a ball has the property being-a-foul-ball-or-fair-ball, all that needs to be the case is that the ball have one of two simpler properties, being-foul or being-fair. No disjunctive properties are needed.

¹ Ronald Feenstra, "Reconsidering Kenotic Christology," in *Trinity, Incarnation and Atonement*, ed. Ronald Feenstra and Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 140–1.

Someone might say that if we are willing to admit *conjunctive properties* (properties of the form P-and-Q) and *negative properties* (properties of the form not-P), then with some elementary logic we have disjunctive properties. For example, my computer is not red and round. If we admit conjunctive and negative properties to account for the truth of this, then it has the property being-not-(red-and-round). But if we admit that it has the property being-not-(red-and-round), then it must either be not red or not round. So, it must have the property being-*not-red-or-not-round*.

Negative properties are just complements of positive properties. If being-red is a positive property, then not-being-red would be its complement negative property. If we admit negative properties, then for every positive property, there would be a negative complement property. But to admit that for every positive property there is also a complement negative property would be to admit more properties than we need to account for similarity.

For example, my best friend and I are both men and were born in Cincinnati. It seems that we have a lot of negative properties in common and that those negative properties can account for some of our similarity. The list of negations that we share could go on and on.

However, to admit negative properties to account for our similarity would admit an infinite number of properties into our ontology for no good reason. All that is needed to account for the similarity between me and my friend are our positive properties. Our positive properties fully account for the similarity, and there is no need to think that there are also countless negative properties. When I see two green wine bottles, I only need positive properties like, being-made-of-glass and being-green to account for their similarity. I do not also need negative properties like not-being-Russian, not-being-hungry, or not-being-a-woman. The positive properties suffice to account for all similarity.²

But even if we could accept disjunctive properties, one might worry about positing that the *essential divine properties* are disjunctive properties. The reason for worrying is that it is difficult to see what independent motivation there is to think that the essential divine are disjunctive in the way that Feenstra suggests. One might worry that this attempt to save kenotic Christology is *ad hoc*.

We will see that Feenstra is probably on the right track in thinking carefully about the nature of omniscience, but a solution that did not simply gerrymander the divine properties without some independent motivation would be much more palatable.

² For more thorough discussion in these issues in the metaphysics of properties see D. M. Armstrong, *Universals: An Opinionated Introduction* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1989); D. M. Armstrong, *A Theory of Universals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978). D. H. Mellor and Alex Oliver, eds., *Properties* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

The Two-Mind View

In his attempt to provide a consistent account of the Incarnation, Thomas Morris proposes to explain how we can accommodate Jesus's apparent lack of omniscience by invoking the idea that Christ had two minds, a divine mind and a human mind.

The two minds of Christ should be thought of as standing in something like an asymmetric relation: the human mind was contained by but did not itself contain the divine mind, or, to portray it from the other side, the divine mind contained, but was not contained, by the human mind. Everything present to the human mind of Christ was thereby present to the divine mind as well, but not vice versa.³

On this view the human mind of Christ can lack omniscience and the divine mind can retain essential omniscience. This would avoid the problem of disjunctive properties and preserves omniscience-*simpliciter* as an essential property of divinity.

But there are crucial details here that need to be worked out. It seems that all human beings satisfy Morris's condition. If God exists, then our minds stand in the same asymmetric relation to God as Christ's. God has immediate and total access to our minds, but we do not have that sort of access to His mind. If all there is to being God incarnate is this asymmetric access relation, then Morris has a problem. We would all be God(s) incarnate.

Morris does say that the accessing relation alone is not intended to be a sufficient condition and gestures toward a more complete theory.⁴ He says that the difference between the Incarnate Christ and ordinary human beings must have something to do with the fact that our human mental systems were intended to define our person, but Christ's human mental state was not meant to alone define His person. The relevant difference between Christ and ordinary human beings is that if a divine mind were to subsume and override our mental system it would abrogate our freedom, however, in Christ's case, if a divine mind were to override His human mind it would not abrogate His freedom.

So the proposal is that for any instance of Incarnation it must be the case that if the divine mind were to subsume and override the human mind, the person's freedom would not be abrogated. I am not sure what this is supposed to amount to. My immediate thought is that *overriding* only occurs when there is a conflict of some sort, so when a divine mind *overrides* a human mind, the human mind loses its freedom. If Morris thinks that a

³ Thomas Morris, "The Metaphysics of God Incarnate," in *Trinity, Incarnation and Atonement*, 121–2.

⁴ Morris, "The Metaphysics of God Incarnate," 125.

divine mind can override Christ's human mind without that loss of freedom, then perhaps "overriding" is employed in some other sense, but I am not sure what this other sense is supposed to be. Consider the following example. Presumably, part of what Christ did was to submit to the divine mind, and it was in some sense necessary for his redemptive work that He do so. If that is true, then there never was or even could be a case of the divine mind overriding the human mind. Determining what the connection is between the divine mind and the human mind relies on determining the truth of some subjunctive conditional in which the antecedent never happens. I do not know how to begin to evaluate something like that.

There might be ways to make sense of Morris's suggestion. Maybe the overriding is not really an overriding of will, but something more like an overriding of thought. For example, suppose that Jesus is walking next to the Sea of Galilee and sees some fish jumping. He remembers that he has not eaten breakfast. He is hungry. And he starts to think about how to catch some fish. His human mind is doing the thinking, but the divine mind has other plans. The divine mind is worried about the upcoming sermon that Jesus is supposed to give soon, and so the divine mind gets Jesus thinking about that instead. The divine mind does this by overriding Jesus's thoughts. The divine mind suppresses some thoughts in order to bring about more meaningful thoughts.

If the above suggestion is to help Morris articulate a difference between Incarnate persons and ordinary human beings, then it needs to be the case that if God were to override our thoughts it would abrogate our freedom. But the problem is that God could do this with us without abrogating our freedom. Let us say my computer just crashed, and I am worried about not meeting some publication deadline. But I have also been rather short with my colleagues lately. God wants me to work things out with my colleagues. Might He not override my thoughts and replace them with thoughts about my colleagues, in hopes that I will then freely choose to do something to make amends. Is not that, in a sense, what our guilty conscience is? If all that is meant by "overriding" is some sort of occasional overriding of thoughts, then God could do this with us without seriously abrogating our freedom. So that sort of overriding (with preservation of personal freedom) can happen not just with Incarnate persons, but with ordinary human beings as well.

Finally, there is another way in which a divine mind could completely override our own mind and not abrogate our freedom. What if we freely ask God to override our minds? If we invite God to override us and he did, then He would not abrogate our freedom.⁵ He would not abrogate our freedom since we voluntarily and freely chose to be in a situation where we are no longer in control of our actions.

⁵ Thanks to Edward Wierenga for bringing this objection to my attention.

Consider an analogy. In some sense it makes sense to hold a drunk driver responsible for some of his actions performed while under the influence of alcohol even if he could not have done otherwise. In one sense the drunk driver cannot do otherwise than to crash into the other car, but the driver chose to put himself in that position so he is still responsible. It would not do for him to say, "How can you hold me responsible when I could not help it?"⁶ There is a sense in which the drunk driver was responsible. Similarly, there is a sense in which we would still be free and responsible for our actions when we freely ask God to override our freedom.

So Morris's suggestion that the difference between an Incarnate person and an ordinary human being rests somehow on what would happen to the freedom of the person if the divine mind overrides the human mind in each case does not help us much. It is fair to say that Morris did not intend for this idea to solve the issue. It is best to interpret Morris's idea as having offered us an avenue to explore in order to develop a complete, consistent account of the Incarnation. But this suggested path needs a lot of work.

Now I will propose a solution to the problem, but before I do, let us briefly summarize where we are. The kenotic theory requires us to revise our conception of what the essential divine properties are, and the only reason for such a revision is to save the thesis that Jesus is divine. There is no independent reason for thinking that essential divine properties are these complex disjunctive properties. If a solution to a theological puzzle can avoid commitments to these disjunctive properties, I think it should. The two-mind theory is simply incomplete. It might solve our problems, but that depends on whether or not the theory turns out to be a viable theory. As it stands, I do not think it is.

Finally, notice that both solutions seek to solve our problem, by first giving an account of how Incarnation is possible. Providing a consistent account of Incarnation is a difficult project. While a consistent account of the Incarnation is desirable, it might be better if we had a theory neutral solution to our problem. That is what I hope to offer in the next section.

Omniscience as a Dispositional State

Suppose the Incarnate Christ could just willingly not access certain classes of propositional knowledge. It would be logically and metaphysically possible to access the knowledge. It just happened to be the case that He chose not to. When he desired to know the answer to some question, he could refer to his divine knowledge if he so chose; it just happened to be the case that in some circumstances he chose not to. Would this solve our problem?

⁶ I thank an anonymous referee for this example.

Stephen T. Davis gestures at a proposal like this. He says,

Just as a skilled tennis player can choose to play a game with their weak hand, so an omnipotent being who can choose to temporarily to limit his power. Similarly, an omnipotent being who is also omniscient can choose temporarily to be non-omniscient, i.e., not to have access, so to speak, to all his knowledge. . . . I believe it is quite possible for an essentially omniscient being temporarily to take non-omniscient form and all the while still be the same essentially omniscient being.⁷

I think there is something very plausible about Davis's suggestion, but the proposal is unclear and could use more elaboration. After all, according to Davis, Christ gave up knowledge. What sense does it make to say that he is still essentially omniscient? In the remainder of this paper, I will offer a way to make sense of Davis's suggestion. I think this proposal will solve our problem.

We make distinctions between *occurrent* and *dispositional* knowledge in ordinary human beings. Sometimes we consciously call propositions to mind. I know I am writing a paper right now. I know I am looking at the computer screen. Call this kind of knowledge *occurrent knowledge*.

Other propositions it is fair to say that we know, even though they are not occurrent. When I am sleeping, I still know that my birthday is in December. When I am typing, I know that George Washington was the first President of the United States. If I were to reflect on those propositions, they would come to the forefront of my mind and become occurrent. Call that kind of knowledge *dispositional knowledge*.⁸

If Christ had dispositional knowledge of all true propositions, then it will still be true to say that he knew all true propositions, and thus was omniscient. However, to make this distinction solve our problem we will need to add a crucial distinction between Christ and ordinary human beings. For an ordinary human being, reflecting on a some piece of dispositional knowledge is sometimes sufficient for it to become occurrent knowledge; we cannot control this process. To solve our problem we will have to say that *mere* reflection is not sufficient for Christ's dispositional knowledge to become occurrent. Since Christ is omnipotent, he would presumably have more control over the barrier that prevents dispositional knowledge from becoming occurrent. In order for Christ's dispositional knowledge to become occurrent he must, through some mental act of will, make the barrier go away.⁹

⁷ Stephen Davis, *The Logic and Nature of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 125.

⁸ For a good discussion on this distinction involving dispositional beliefs see Robert Audi, "Dispositional Beliefs and Dispositions to Believe," *Noûs* 28 (1994): 419–34.

⁹ It should not seem so strange that choice is involved in making some dispositional knowledge become occurrent. An anonymous referee for this journal notes that we sometimes know the details of a particular philosophical argument, but need to think it through again in order to

Now we are closer to characterizing omniscience in a way that solves our problem. Christ is omniscient in that, for any true proposition he were to entertain, he could immediately will to have occurrent awareness of its truth-value. He knows all true propositions, but for his purposes on earth he chose not to have access to those propositions the way He normally does. While these considerations might not yield a full definition of “omniscience,” I think it is enough to offer a sufficient condition for being omniscient. If an agent *A* has no false beliefs and satisfies the following condition (4), then *A* is omniscient.

- (4) For all true propositions *P*, *A* has dispositional knowledge that *P* and could (upon considering *P*) actively will that proposition from a dispositional state to an occurrent state of knowledge.

This should not seem entirely absurd. Knowledge of all true propositions is still readily available to Christ on this account. Is not that good enough to be omniscient?

Now we have a solution to our problem. In the cases where Jesus apparently lacks knowledge, what he lacks is *occurrent* knowledge. Furthermore, we do not rely on any account of the Incarnation. Is that not an advantage? Christians will want a consistent account of the Incarnation, but at least they do not need it for this problem. Furthermore, we leave ourselves open to the possibility that there is a theory of Incarnation that would not by itself solve our problem. Our solution to the problem is neutral on the issue of Incarnation. Now let us turn our attention to some questions this proposal might raise.

Some Questions

Exactly how does this work? Perhaps it would be helpful to give another example. Jesus said that there will come a time when the heavens and earth will pass away. Let us say that someone were to ask Jesus when that hour will be. Jesus is confronted with a question. He is starting to consider an answer. If he were like the rest of us, if he knew the proposition, then it would immediately come to the forefront of his mind. He would not really have much control over this. Just like when someone asks who the first president of the United States was. The proposition “George Washington was the first president of the United States” becomes occurrent knowledge; that process is beyond our control. However, Jesus is not like us in this scenario. He is divine. He is omnipotent, and he has a little extra control over his occurrent mental states. He can choose to keep that proposition in the dis-

make it occurrent. We might have to think it out to remember the content has certain principles. We can do it, but it takes a bit of mental energy. So we need to choose to make that knowledge occurrent.

positional realm. This could explain why he utters, “Not even the Son knows when that hour will be. Only the Father.”

But why might Jesus do this? Well, I imagine that for the purposes of his earthly mission, there are certain propositions that Jesus is not supposed to have easy occurrent access to. This might help him share more fully in our human condition. Assuming there are these sorts of propositions, when Jesus considers a proposition, through communion with the Father he is aware that some part of his earthly mission requires that he not access his knowledge of that proposition. Jesus, then chooses not to defy the Father. He is still omniscient. He knows these propositions. He is just limiting his access. It is still always within his control to then will his knowledge to the occurrent state.

Doesn't that make Jesus a liar? There are passages in Scripture where Jesus *explicitly* claims not to know certain propositions. If he really did know these propositions, then is he not a liar? If he is a liar, then do we not have good reason to think that he was not fully divine? Surely divine beings would never tell a lie.

Presumably the reason that Christ would be blocking access to certain propositions, is that his earthly mission requires that he act as if he had no knowledge of those propositions. If that is the case, then is he really committing some moral wrong by claiming that he does not know certain propositions? I do not think so. Christ could engage his disciples in a long complicated lesson about divine epistemology, but why do that? They do not need to know these things, and on some clarifications of the word “know” Christ does not know those propositions (He does not occurrently know them).

One might argue that he is lying. For example, Christ could have with little confusion said something like “I could know, but choose not to” or “The Father does not will it for me at this time.” Surely, he could have said something like that. We will have to acknowledge that there are a number of more specific things that Christ could have communicated about his knowledge base.

But even if we acknowledge that Christ could have used more precise language, it is far from clear that we are committed to saying that his failure to do so would constitute a moral wrong. If the situations that God intends to realize are such that *for all practical purposes* Jesus does not know a certain proposition, It would be permissible for God the Father or God the Son to tell God's creatures that Jesus does not know those propositions.¹⁰

¹⁰ Peter van Inwagen makes a similar argument in his discussion of Genesis. There he argues that it would be permissible for God to tell us something that was strictly speaking false. See Peter van Inwagen, “Genesis and Evolution,” in *Reasoned Faith: Essays in Philosophical Theology in Honor of Norman Kretzmann*, ed. Eleonore Stump (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 93–127.

Isn't this a little ad hoc? The main goal of constructing this theory is to find a consistent way to account for all of what Christians take to be data. Jesus is divine. He is omniscient and yet he seems to lack knowledge. I am merely trying to construct a theory that would account for what Christians typically take to be true.

But, it would not be entirely satisfying if we had no good basis to accept certain components of the theory outside of trying to accommodate this data. So perhaps I should try to provide some independent support for the crucial element of this theory, namely that Christ had this ability to block access to his own knowledge.

I think this can easily be done. The ability to have control of this kind over one's mental states, seems to straightforwardly follow from omnipotence. Why would not an omnipotent being have control over the contents of some of his occurrent mental states? In fact, given the assumption that Jesus was omnipotent, if a person wanted to deny that Jesus could have this power, then the burden would be on that person to explain why an omnipotent being would not have this power. So I think there are good reasons, independent of solving our problem to think that Jesus might have had this ability. Omnipotent beings should be able to do the sort of things I have described.

Conclusion

The problem was that certain passages in Scripture suggest that Jesus was not omniscient. This threatens His divinity. I examined two recent solutions that depended on the success of some particular theories of the Incarnation. Recent attempts to defend the kenotic theory resort to a theory of properties that it would be best to avoid, and the application of disjunctive properties to modify the properties essential to divinity is unmotivated. We do not have good independent reasons to think that essential divine properties are the disjunctive properties that kenotic Christology must hold. Morris's two-mind account of Incarnation is incomplete. I tried to elaborate on a proposal that will solve our problem without first providing a consistent account of the Incarnation. It involves reexamining what it would take for a being to be omniscient. If Christ had dispositional knowledge of all true propositions and could will any one of them to an occurrent state of knowledge, then he would be omniscient. We now have a good candidate solution to our problem.¹¹

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