

Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 6 | Issue 2

Article 9

4-1-1989

Morris, THE LOGIC OF GOD INCARNATE

Eleonore Stump

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

Recommended Citation

Stump, Eleonore (1989) "Morris, THE LOGIC OF GOD INCARNATE," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 2 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol6/iss2/9>

This Book Review 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.

BOOK REVIEWS

The Logic of God Incarnate, by **Thomas V. Morris**. Cornell University Press, 1986. Pp. 220, \$19.95 (cloth), \$8.95 (paper).

Reviewed by ELEONORE STUMP, Virginia Tech.

In this excellent book Thomas Morris undertakes to defend the orthodox, Chalcedonian doctrine of the incarnation, which holds that Christ was one person with two natures, a fully divine nature and a fully human nature. His purpose is not to show that the doctrine is true but rather to rebut arguments designed to show it false. He considers four different sorts of attack on the doctrine: (1) objections that the doctrine is logically incoherent; (2) charges that the doctrine is incongruent with certain cosmological claims; (3) epistemological claims that belief in the doctrine of the incarnation is unreasonable; and (4) worries that the doctrine cannot be appropriately related to the doctrine of the Trinity. At the end of the book he devotes a chapter apiece to each of the last three sorts of attack. All the rest of the book is given over to his attempt to answer the first charge, to show that the doctrine is not logically incoherent, and my review will focus on that material.

He begins by considering various simple ways of obviating a charge of incoherence, including claims that the violation of logical laws is just what we should expect of religious mysteries and that the indiscernibility of identicals is a principle Christians should reject. Morris quite rightly repudiates such claims as moves of desperation. He then turns his attention to attempts at defending the doctrine by adopting an account of it different from the Chalcedonian. For example, some proponents of the doctrine have held that Christ should be said to have only one nature, on the grounds that the nature of anything is just the most comprehensive set of its essential properties, so that it is strictly speaking inconceivable for anything to have more than one nature. To this view Morris replies that if we are thinking of a nature as a haecceity or individual essence, then it is a conceptual truth that no individual can have more than one nature, but that if a nature is taken to be the set of properties individually necessary and jointly sufficient for membership in a natural kind (where by 'natural kind' we mean a group picked out with reference to the fundamental structure and causal powers of the things in the group), it is not impossible for a single thing to have more than one such nature.

Morris also makes short shrift of the attempt to defend the Chalcedonian account of the incarnation by using reduplicative propositions. According to this strategy, [S] that both unlimited and limited power, for example, are attributed to Christ does not show the doctrine of the incarnation incoherent because omnipotence is

predicated of Christ in his divine nature and lack of omnipotence is predicated of him in his human nature. There is an objection to this strategy which goes as follows: [O] for any reduplicative proposition ‘*x* as *A* is *N* and *x* as *B* is not *N*,’ if “the reduplication predicates being *A* of *x* and predicates being *B* of *x*” and if “being *N* is entailed by being *A*, and not being *N* is entailed by being *B*” (p. 48), the reduplicative proposition is nothing more than a complicated way of predicating contradictory attributes of its subject, *x*. After rebutting a rather simplistic reply to [O], Morris concludes that [S], the strategy of defending the doctrine of the incarnation by using reduplicative propositions, is inadequate.

I think Morris goes too fast here. From the fact that a certain defense of [S] is inadequate, it does not follow that [S] itself is inadequate; and the challenge posed by [O] seems to me not to be cogent. Consider this proposition, analogous to the reduplicative proposition that Christ as regards his divine nature is omnipotent and Christ as regards his human nature is not omnipotent: Socrates as Caucasian is light-colored and Socrates as dark-haired is not light-colored. As the objection characterizes such propositions, it predicates being Caucasian of Socrates and being dark-haired of Socrates; being Caucasian entails being light-skinned and so light-colored, and being dark-haired entails not being light-colored. So, applying the objection’s line, we should apparently say that this proposition is just a complicated way of attributing contradictory properties, namely, being light-colored and not being light-colored, to Socrates. What is wrong with this analysis of the reduplicative proposition about Socrates, of course, is that it disregards the very reduplicative character of the proposition it was meant to analyze. The proposition about Socrates does not predicate contradictory attributes of Socrates because the contradictory attributes in question are attributed to Socrates only in virtue of being attributed to certain separate features of Socrates; that is, they are not predicated of Socrates simpliciter but only in a certain respect. Similarly, the property of being omnipotent (as well as the property of being God) is not predicated of Christ simpliciter but only in respect of his divine nature; and the same can be said, *mutatis mutandis*, about the property of being limited in power (as well as the property of being human). So the reduplicative proposition is not just a complicated way of attributing contradictory attributes to a subject, and [O] is unsuccessful. Consequently, we do not have a good reason for dismissing [S], the strategy of defending the doctrine of the incarnation by means of reduplicative propositions. (Of course, to say so much is not to say that the reduplicative strategy by itself is a sufficient defense of the doctrine of the incarnation since quite a lot of explanation would still be required to show that it is not impossible for one person to have two natures of the requisite kind.)

Morris’s own defense of the doctrine against charges of incoherence is founded on two notions. The first is a distinction between common (even universal)

human properties and essential human properties, and the second is an interpretation of Christ as having two minds, one human and the other divine. Morris argues that there is no reason for Christians to count as essential human properties any properties common to human beings which are incompatible with divine properties (including omnipotence, omniscience, and impeccability). He says that although Christ was *fully* human in the sense that he had all *essential* human properties, he was not *merely* human because his human nature did not include any ordinary human properties incompatible with the panoply of divine attributes. Being contingent, coming into existence, and being able to sin are examples of ordinary human properties which are not also essentially human; having a body at some past or present time during one's existence and having ordinary human consciousness at some time in one's existence are examples of essential human properties. This understanding of human nature is bound to strike some of Morris's philosophical readers as implausible, and the account Morris gives of the two natures of Christ will seem to some theologians to eviscerate the Chalcedonian doctrine. If the only constituents of the human nature Christ takes on are those properties essential to human beings but not incompatible with any divine properties, what I share with Christ as regards human nature seems rather meager.

Moreover, the benefit of interpreting the human nature of Christ in this way is not clear since in the end it is necessary for Morris to attribute incompatible properties to the incarnate Christ, because (among other reasons) Scripture attributes various properties to Jesus, such as not knowing the date of the last judgment, which are not compatible with standard divine properties. And in fact Morris introduces a device for handling the attribution of contradictory properties to Christ in his notion of the two minds of Christ. In his human mind Christ is not omniscient; in his divine mind he is omniscient. The omniscience of the divine mind does not characterize the human mind because while the divine mind has full access to the human mind, the human mind has only limited access to the divine mind. Although it is true of Christ that he is both omniscient and limited in knowledge, in saying so we are not attributing contradictory predicates to the same thing because he is omniscient *in his divine mind* and limited in knowledge *in his human mind*.

So for the more customary interpretation of the Chalcedonian doctrine, which understands the two natures of Christ as including incompatible properties, Morris substitutes an understanding of the two natures as having properties which, though different, are not incompatible; and he adds two minds, each of which has some attributes not compatible with some of the other mind's attributes. He rejects the traditional reduplicative strategy for defending the doctrine of the incarnation but adopts an analogous strategy founded on the notion that Christ had two minds. How successful is this account of Morris's as a defense of the

doctrine of the incarnation against the charge that it is logically incoherent?

The account of Christ as having two minds seems to carry with it all the problems which attach to the account of Christ as having two natures at least some of whose properties are incompatible. How can there be one person who has two minds? Where there are two minds, won't there be two persons? Morris points to cases of split personality and cerebral commissurotomy to support a negative answer to this question, but interpretation of those cases is sufficiently controversial and the cases themselves sufficiently disanalogous to the case of the incarnate Christ that not all readers will be persuaded. (Morris also presents Aquinas's account of how the two *natures* of Christ can be comprised in one person, but that account is grounded in medieval metaphysics about substances and is in any case not clearly relevant to showing how two *minds* can comprise just one person.) Furthermore, how are the two minds of Christ welded together into one person? The asymmetrical accessing relationship between the divine mind of Christ and the human mind of Christ is just the relationship which holds between God's mind and every human mind. Why is it then that Jesus counts as the incarnate Christ, and the apostle Peter, for example, does not? Morris answers such questions by arguing that God owns the human mind of Jesus in a way he does not own other minds and that the causal and cognitive powers of the human mind of Christ just are the causal and cognitive powers of the divine mind. But Morris doesn't say much about the special relation of ownership between God and the human mind of Christ, and it's hard to see how to specify such a relation between the creator and owner of all things and one particular human mind. On the other hand, if the special relationship is established because the two minds of Christ both operate with the causal and cognitive power of the divine mind, it isn't clear how the asymmetrical accessing relationship between the two minds is preserved while Christ's human mind operates with the cognitive powers of God. To be limited in knowledge or mistaken in belief or in any other way to have a mind which is not the same as the mind of God seems to require acting with cognitive power but cognitive power which is not omniscient. Alternatively, if the human mind of Christ really is limited in knowledge, if at some time Christ's human mind had only those capacities appropriate to a human infant, say, then it is hard to understand the claim that that human mind was operating with the cognitive power of the deity.

Finally, even if these questions could all be satisfactorily answered, Morris's account doesn't seem adequately to defend the doctrine of the incarnation against the charge of logical incoherence. For example, it attributes to Christ both being omniscient and being less than omniscient. Morris holds that attributing both these properties to Christ is not equivalent to attributing contradictory properties to the same thing, because the property of being omniscient is attributed to Christ in his divine mind and the property of being less than omniscient is attributed

to him in his human mind. But it is part of Morris's account and of the Chalcedonian doctrine that the incarnate Christ is *one* person. But if he is a person in any ordinary sense of the word 'person,' and if even with two minds he is still *one* person, then any attributions of knowledge or ignorance will have the single person Christ as their subject. We might suppose that even so, one and the same person can sometimes be said without contradiction both to know and not to know the same thing. Hearing an absent-minded man say that he knows his phone number but he just can't think of it, we might be inclined to say that he both knows and doesn't know his phone number. But in this example 'know' is being used ambiguously to refer both to stored knowledge and to knowledge held in the forefront of consciousness. With 'know' used in these two different ways, it is perhaps the case that one person can correctly be said both to know and not to know the same piece of information. If we restrict our consideration, however, just to what has sometimes been called occurrent knowledge, knowledge which is held with awareness, in the forefront of consciousness, then it does not seem possible for one and the same person simultaneously to know and not to know the same piece of information under the same description. But this is just the state Morris's account must attribute to the incarnate Christ. God as omniscient always knows everything, including the date of the last judgment, and knows it with full awareness (an omniscient being does not have to go through a process of recall to have access to what he knows); the Scriptures, however, describe Jesus as claiming that he does not know the date of the last judgment. Therefore, even on the account of Christ as having two minds, it will turn out that one and the same person, Christ, simultaneously knows occurrently and does not know occurrently the same thing, namely, the date of the last judgment. Morris's interpretation of the doctrine of the incarnation, then, does after all predicate contradictory properties of one and the same thing in just the way detractors of the doctrine claim the doctrine does.

There is a similar difficulty in Morris's discussion of the temptations of Christ. Given the claim that God is necessarily good and the Scriptural account that Jesus was tempted to sin, we seem required to predicate of Christ the contradictory properties being able to sin and not being able to sin. Morris argues with great ingenuity that being tempted does not require the metaphysical possibility of sinning but only the epistemic possibility. In order to be tempted, the tempted person need only believe (even if incorrectly) that it is possible for him to sin. So on Morris's account we are not attributing contradictory properties to the incarnate Christ in holding that he was God and yet was tempted to sin, because Christ was necessarily good and was tempted in his human nature only in virtue of sin's being an epistemic (although not a metaphysical) possibility for him. This account does keep us from attributing to Christ the contradictory properties being able to sin and not being able to sin, but only in virtue of attributing a

different set of contradictory properties to him. On this account, at one and the same time Christ as omniscient knows that he is unable to sin and as human, having the epistemic possibility of sinning, does not know that he is unable to sin. It seems to me arguable that the reduplicative strategy applied to the traditional account of the two natures of Christ could show that in attributing both omniscience and limited knowledge to Christ we are not attributing contradictory properties to one and the same thing. But if so, then the reduplicative strategy is also sufficient to show that in attributing to Christ both necessary goodness and the ability to sin we aren't predicating contradictory attributes of him either.

My review has concentrated on the parts of Morris's book which are bound to be controversial, but that approach must not be allowed to obscure the substantial achievement of this book. With admirable boldness, Morris has set out to defend one of the Christian doctrines which has always seemed most vulnerable to philosophical attack. He is obviously at home in dealing with both philosophical and theological literature on the subject, and his treatment of the doctrine's detractors is patient and fair. The presentation of his own account is beautifully clear and philosophically sophisticated, and he develops his position with ingenuity and subtlety. While I find problems in Morris's view of Christ as having two minds, the general strategy underlying this view, of compartmentalizing the divine and human attributes of Christ and predicating them of Christ *secundum quid* rather than *simpliciter*, seems to me certainly on the right track. Although there is much to disagree with in the book, then, it is nonetheless a model for the way philosophy of religion should be done. Not everyone will agree with Morris's interpretation and defense of the incarnation, but no one should ignore them.

The Only Wise God: The Compatibility of Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom, by **William Lane Craig**. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987, 157 pp., \$7.95 (paper), ISBN 0-8010-2519-2.

Reviewed by WILLIAM HASKER, Huntington College.

According to William Lane Craig, "today the Christian seeking after truth will probably learn more about the attributes of God from works of Christian philosophers than from those of Christian theologians" (p. 11). In this volume he presents the results of philosophical work on the doctrine of omniscience, focusing on the compatibility of divine foreknowledge and free will with some attention given also to middle knowledge.

Craig states his belief that "any reader who is willing to take the time and make an effort to evaluate the reasoning presented here will find it simple enough to grasp" (p. 12). He has, in fact, succeeded to a remarkable degree in giving