

Divine holiness and the explanation of Christ's impeccability

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Abstract: Supposing that Christ is *impeccable* – that, necessarily, Christ does not sin – what explains that impeccability? While there have been multiple theories of how the operations of Christ's human will could be fully free while Christ's sinlessness is nevertheless guaranteed, such accounts cannot be exploited to provide the requisite explanation. And not all of the divine purposes sufficient for becoming incarnate would also be sufficient to explain why Christ must be sinless. We should instead explain Christ's impeccability *normatively*, in terms of the reasons that God has to respond appropriately to God's own perfection by refraining from taking on a human nature with a will that ever opposes the divine will. Such reasons are reasons of divine *holiness*.

Sinlessness and impeccability

It is authoritative Christian teaching that Jesus Christ, who is necessarily the Second Person of the Trinity and who assumed a human nature, never actually sinned. This is clearly affirmed in Christian Scripture and reaffirmed throughout the tradition. It is commonly, though not universally, also taught that Christ *necessarily* never sinned, that it is *impossible* that Jesus Christ sin. This is the doctrine of Christ's *impeccability*. It is not simply the doctrine, universally affirmed in Christian teaching, of Christ's sinlessness. The doctrine of impeccability adds to the thesis that Christ never actually sinned a claim of necessity, that not only did Christ never sin, it is impossible that Christ sin.

What *explains* the necessity of Christ's sinlessness? I aim in this article to make a case that the absolute holiness of God is the best explanation for the impeccability of Christ. After describing the assumptions regarding the Incarnation in terms of which I frame my argument, I turn to various possible responses to the demand for an explanation for Christ's impeccability. Against a quietist response to this

demand, I say that Christ's impeccability requires a more-than-trivial explanation. While there have been multiple accounts of what I will call the 'mechanics of impeccability' – theories of how Christ could be fully free while Christ's sinlessness is nevertheless a matter of necessity – I will show that such accounts cannot be exploited to provide the requisite explanation of Christ's necessary sinlessness; and I will also give reasons to reject the view that any divine purposes sufficient for becoming incarnate would also be sufficient to explain that necessity. I want to say, rather, that we must explain the necessary sinlessness of Christ *normatively*, in terms of the decisive reason that God has to respond appropriately to God's own perfection by not taking on a human nature with a will that ever opposes the divine will. The best account available appeals to reasons that I will identify as reasons of divine holiness.

Two framing assumptions regarding the Incarnation

In the arguments to come, I make use of two theses regarding incarnation that are not universally affirmed. The first is 'dyothelitism': that when God becomes incarnate, the Second Person of the Trinity thereupon has two wills, one divine, one human.¹ These wills are distinct from each other, and each has its own operation and standard for excellent activity. Holding that Christ has two wills is a consistent teaching of the councils of the early Church and is thus part of ecumenical Christianity. Here, for example, is third Constantinople: 'We proclaim equally two natural volitions in [Christ] and two natural principles of action which undergo no division, no change, no partition, no confusion, in accordance with the teaching of the holy fathers.'² And here is second Nicaea: 'There are two wills and principles of action, in accordance with what is proper to each of the natures of Christ.'³ It is as far as I can see very hard to make sense of the notion that Christ was like us 'in all ways but sin' unless Christ had a human will.

In order to make clear the second thesis of which I make use, it will be helpful to consider briefly a distinction between two ways of conceptualizing the Incarnation. Timothy Pawl, following Oliver Crisp,⁴ helpfully distinguishes between two conceptions of the human nature that the Second Person assumed. On the *abstract* view of natures, the nature in question is the property *being human*, and for the Second Person to assume a human nature is to exemplify that property, with all that exemplifying it entails. On the *concrete* view, the nature assumed is a *concre-tum*, an individual creaturely substance-like entity. This concrete, individual creaturely nature can be considered apart from its being assumed; one can say that had it existed without being assumed, then it would have been a complete human person of a kind common to you and me, though not of course divine.⁵ As assumed, though, it is *not* an individual person, but one nature of a two-natured divine being.

When I speak of the human nature of the Second Person, I will be employing the latter, concretist understanding. As Pawl convincingly argues, this is the sense of 'nature' that is standard in what he calls 'Conciliar Christology',⁶ that is, the teaching on Christ put forward in the first seven ecumenical councils of the Church.⁷ That is my main reason to be willing to employ the concretist view. But another reason is simply that of expositional convenience: it seems to me that the arguments of this article are simpler to formulate by framing them in terms of the concretist view.⁸

Now, I of course understand that neither of these two assumptions is beyond objection. Even one who takes the conciliar teachings to be authoritative might take the concretist framing of the Incarnation to be not part of the councils' teaching but rather a no-more-than-optional way of presenting that teaching, and might take that way of presenting the teaching to be dubious.⁹ Or in both cases one might take the conciliar teaching to have a default status that is nevertheless able to be overturned in the face of persistent theological or philosophical objections, and one might take there to be unanswerable objections either to dyothelitism about Christ's volitional capacities or concretism about the metaphysics of the Incarnation. One would then be rightly unmoved by the fact that the arguments of this article are easier to present by deploying dyothelitism and concretism. While I am primarily concerned to give an explanation of Christ's impeccability within conciliar Christology, I nevertheless think that the main thrust of my argument can be preserved even without these assumptions. So I will, at various points, briefly note how the argument could be framed in a way that does not assume the standard dyothelitist and concretist positions regarding the Incarnation.

Christ's impeccability requires a non-trivial explanation

This article aims to defend a particular explanation of Christ's impeccability. Before turning to candidate explanations, let me consider briefly the notion that it is misleading to inquire into explanations for Christ's necessary sinlessness, because Christ's necessary sinlessness requires no explanation, or only the most trivial explanation.

One might say that Christ's necessary sinlessness requires no explanation because it is supposed to be a necessary truth, and necessary truths cannot be explained. But that necessary truths invariably cannot be explained is false. Suppose it were true that necessarily, there exist beings other than God. There are different ways that could be necessarily true. It could be that these beings are necessary existents, that they could not fail to exist, and that this is a brute fact. Or it could be that necessarily, God has decisive reasons to create, and so God, because necessarily rational and necessarily able to create, creates. Or it could be that *being creative* is itself a fundamental divine perfection, and so God, being perfect, creates. These describe different ways in which some necessity could hold; though the first is not explanatory, the latter two definitely are. So it is

not in itself misguided to ask for an explanation of a truth just due to that truth's being necessary.¹⁰ Further, when we are dealing with the actions of an agent, we would typically think that we can explain necessary actions by appealing to necessary features of the agent's motivational structure, perhaps their brute desires, perhaps their reasons for action, and so forth. It seems very implausible to think that Christ's necessarily never sinning cannot be explained in one of these ways, if indeed the doctrine of Christ's impeccability is true.

One might allow that the doctrine of divine impeccability does call for explanation while insisting that the explanation is trivial. Here is Oliver Crisp:

If God is necessarily good – a view that is certainly deeply ingrained in Christian theology and spirituality, to the extent that it is the default view in the tradition – then, as a simple matter of logic, he cannot be able to sin.¹¹

The argument here is: God is necessarily sinless; Christ is God; so Christ is necessarily sinless. Because the explanation is so straightforward, looking for a further explanation for Christ's necessary sinlessness is pointless.

This argument does not at all render pointless an investigation into why Christ is necessarily sinless. For it is a commonplace of Christological predication that we can truly predicate features to Christ that are on their face limitations incompatible with absolute perfection. Christ grew in wisdom, Scripture tells us, suggesting that there were things that Christ did not know and later came to know. But not knowing things seems incompatible with absolute perfection, for omniscience is among the divine perfections. The result of this is a need to make clear how to fit necessary divine omniscience with the limitations that need to be ascribed to Christ in virtue of possessing a human nature. For we want to be able to say that, in some sense due to Christ's divine nature, Christ is omniscient,¹² but also in some sense due to Christ's human nature, Christ is limited in knowledge. Christ's being limited in knowledge is made true, somehow, by Christ's having a human nature.¹³

There are multiple accounts of how features of Christ's human nature that entail limitation can be properly ascribed to Christ, though Christ is divine. Take, for instance, Pawl's view. Pawl suggests an account of predication on which to exhibit a feature is to have a nature with a certain essential or accidental character.¹⁴ (For most supposita – all but Jesus Christ – the rule is that the concrete nature is the suppositum. But this is not so of the two-natured Christ.) Such a move enables Pawl to deny that the affirmation of Jesus Christ's divine perfection is incompatible with Jesus Christ's human limitations. For Christ has a divine nature with the essential character of knowing all, and thus Christ is omniscient; Christ has a human nature with the essential character (I think it is essential, but at least accidental) of not knowing all, and so Christ is limited in knowledge.

I am not aiming here to adopt Pawl's view, powerful though it is. My point is just that any non-kenotic account of the Incarnation is going to have to adopt some such view that exhibits the consistency of ascribing both divine perfections and

human limitations to Christ, and that once such a view is in place, it just as easily can be used to explain Christ's peccability as it would explain Christ's having limited knowledge. If Christ's human will is like mine – which it is – then it is a peccable will, a will that of its own nature can go awry, departing from what God wills for us humans to will. One way to put the point is to say that since it seems that Christ's human nature, if unassumed, would constitute a complete human (non-divine) individual that would be capable of sinning, it is obvious that we need *some* account of the difference assumption makes that removes this possibility. Even if one thinks that it is not so much as possible for Christ's individual human nature to exist unassumed,¹⁵ one can make the relevant point by noting that there could be an intrinsic duplicate of Christ's human nature that does exist unassumed, and being a typical single-natured human being placed in the ordinary circumstances of human life, that being would be able to sin. So why isn't Christ able, by way of his human will, to sin?

Once you are committed to the position that we can make sense of the consistency of Christ's omniscience and limited knowledge by appeal to some theory of predication, that theory of predication will also allow you to make sense of the consistency of Christ's divine sinlessness and human sinfulness. If one goes on to deny that Christ can sin, even through Christ's human will, there must be something *further* that explains that denial. For, on the face of things, we would have all the resources at the ready to be able to say Christ possibly sins (that Christ has a human will) and to exhibit why that is nevertheless compatible with necessary divine sinlessness (that there is some suitable account of predication by which features incompatible with perfection can be ascribed to Christ). And that does not seem to me to count as a situation in which Christ's impeccability is in need only of the most trivial of explanations.¹⁶

These considerations seem to me to be sufficient to put paid to the idea that Christ's necessary sinlessness does not require investigation. If we are committed to the view that other limitations are, in some sense, possibly (and in some cases, even actually) ascribed to Christ, then it looks like we as yet lack a basis for thinking that the sort of limitation that is sinning could not possibly be ascribed, in that same sense, to Christ. But the weight of tradition is against ascribing the possibility of sinning to Christ in that sense. (Pawl, for example, holds that Christ could sin only in the sense that Christ's individual human nature, if not assumed by the second Person, could sin;¹⁷ but we are to hold that the mind associated with Christ's human nature might fail to know all things, even when assumed; so there must be some difference that explains why Christ is not unqualifiedly omniscient but is unqualifiedly impeccable.)

This is in no way to call into question Christ's necessary sinlessness or the possibility of exhibiting why that sinlessness is necessary; it is only to reject dismissals of the need for an explanation of Christ's necessary sinlessness. But as we will see in the next few sections, the most obvious candidates are less than satisfactory.

The mechanics of impeccability

The affirmation of Christ's impeccability is not sufficiently defended by Christ's having a divine nature and a divine being's being impeccable. Christ's impeccability concerns not only the divine will but Christ's human will. As Christ's will is a human will, and human wills are the sort of wills that characteristically make possible their possessors' sinning,¹⁸ we need some account of why it is that it is impossible for Christ's human will to go awry.

In what sense must it be true, for Christ to be impeccable in this wholly unqualified way, that Christ is *unable* to sin? It must, at least, include this: that there is no possible world in which, having assumed that concrete individual human nature that the Second Person assumed, the Second Person has a sinful will. I take as given that the divine will of the Second Person necessarily is not sinful, either because that will is not of the sort to which standards the violation of which constitute *sin* apply or because that will necessarily conforms entirely with the relevant standards violation of which would constitute sin. The issue is the *human* will of the Second Person – though it is of a kind (*human*) that can sin, why is there nevertheless no possibility that it will, if assumed, sin?

One might hope that we could find such an explanation in the multiple accounts of the compatibility of Christ's impeccability with Christ's exhibiting full human freedom; one might hope that within such accounts we are offered an explanation as to how the fact of assumption both bestows impeccability on Christ's human will while nevertheless not undermining its characteristic human freedom. On one sort of view of this compatibility, Christ's human will, strictly speaking, needs no extra assistance beyond graces provided to ordinary wayfaring humans in order for Christ's unqualified impeccability to be realized. It is, rather, divine 'middle knowledge' – God's prevolitional knowledge of counterfactuals involving creaturely free action¹⁹ – along with a judicious divine selection of a human nature in which to become incarnate that together entail Christ's impeccability. I will call this the *Molinist* view, in virtue of its central appeal to a distinctively Molinist account of divine foreknowledge and its use by contemporary self-described Molinists to explain the compatibility of Christ's impeccability and Christ's perfect freedom.²⁰ Another sort of account appeals to a device that precludes the ordinary fallout of wayward choice by God's providing a fail-safe that necessitates sinlessness while allowing otherwise normal operation of choice via Christ's human will; call this the *Scotistic* view. The third view, the *Thomistic* view, proposes that, though Christ has a human will like ours, Christ's situation of choice is sufficiently different from ours that it ensures that Christ will never fall into sin.

The Molinist view as I will present it posits no particular means of assisting Christ's human will to ensure Christ's impeccability. It does, however, presuppose the Molinist position that God has extensive middle knowledge. Given that middle knowledge, God could know prior to selecting a concrete individual human nature

to assume and other details of the world to be actualized whether the will of any concrete individual nature would, if assumed in some set of circumstances given by that world, sin. God thus has the ability to see to it that God does not become incarnate in any individual human nature that, if assumed, would have a sinful will.²¹ Necessarily, though, God does not choose to become incarnate in an individual nature in a world in which that individual human nature would have a sinful will.²² So there is no possible world in which, having assumed any concrete individual human nature that the Second Person might assume, the Second Person has a sinful will via that Person's human nature: for having the will, knowledge, and power to ensure that any individual human nature assumed is not one that will go on to sin, God necessarily ensures that no such sin takes place in the wake of that Person's assuming a nature.

On the Scotistic view, the way that the necessity of Christ's not sinning is ensured is that God has the power to interfere with any willing by Christ's human nature that is at odds with the divine will and thus would count as sinning. Even though, on Scotus's view, Christ's human nature is blessed, in that it has a vision of the divine essence available to it, the nature of a creaturely will just is that it can go in opposite directions, and is not of its own nature necessitated to go one way in any circumstances whatever. But God can see to it, though, that a will is rendered unable to exercise its operation in any way that would constitute sin; and as, necessarily, God must want any nature assumed by God not to sin, God would employ this power.²³ Thomas Morris, in defending Christ's impeccability against the charge that it entails Christ's not being genuinely free, affirms the Scotistic account while making use of Frankfurt's arguments against the principle of alternate possibilities as a basis for holding that such an account does not entail that Christ's sinlessness was not genuinely free.²⁴ In Frankfurt's famous cases,²⁵ Frankfurt argues that the possibility of acting otherwise is not essential to freedom of choice; it is possible that one acts freely in choosing to refrain from ϕ -ing even if it is the case that the agent would be prevented from choosing to ϕ . Morris exploits this thesis to argue that Christ's praiseworthy sinlessness is compatible with Christ's necessary sinlessness due to the availability of the divine mind/will of Christ having the power to preclude sinful choice without thereby undermining the praiseworthy excellence of Christ's non-sinful choice: even if the divine mind/will of Christ would have precluded Christ's human will from falling into sin, should the occasion have arisen, the occasion did not so arise, and so Christ's exemplary behaviour was entirely free.

On the classic Thomistic view, there is no need for such a further divine mechanism to explain the possibility of Christ's human will being fully free but necessarily sinless. On the Thomistic view, while we pilgrims *in via* have the possibility of sinning due to the fact that multiple distinct and conflicting goods can appear worthy of choice to us – including those that are promised by sinful action – the blessed in heaven who are in the immediate presence of God necessarily choose well, as the vivid immediate awareness of God's goodness, the

beatific vision, precludes one's being drawn to the goods promised by sinful action due to the obviously superior choiceworthiness of the goods of union with God. The will is inclined to the good as such, and as what one encounters vividly in the beatific vision is the good as such, there is no prospect of the will's going astray. The thought, then, is that due to being God incarnate, the human mind of Christ enjoys the beatific vision even during Christ's earthly life, and thus there is no prospect of Christ's will's ever waywardly falling into sin.

All three of these views – Molinist, Scotistic, and Thomistic – appeal to divine action with respect to the assumed concrete human nature of Christ to explain how Christ's necessary sinlessness is compatible with Christ's full human freedom.²⁶ The Molinist view does so by appeal to middle knowledge; the Scotistic view does so by appealing to a divine choice to limit the possibility of sinful willing in a way that nevertheless preserves the possibility of Christ's acting well qua human; the Thomistic view does so by appealing to an account of how free but necessary action is possible for a creature, one that involves the divine provision of the beatific vision to a human even during that human's earthly life. But none of these views, as stated, explains the necessity of Christ's sinlessness. I do not take this to be a *criticism* of these views; the aim of these accounts is primarily to exhibit the compatibility of impeccability and freedom, not to establish or explain impeccability. But we should be very clear that to establish the compatibility of impeccability and freedom is not to show that or explain why Christ is impeccable rather than merely sinless.

This is most obvious with respect to the Molinist and Scotistic accounts. On both of these views, a mechanism is characterized that is, *if employed*, sufficient to ensure that the assumed human nature of Christ will not have a will that falls into sin. But whether that mechanism is utilized is a matter of divine choice. This is sufficient to render unexplained Christ's impeccability. For if an essential element of the account is the Second Person's choosing to make use of that sinlessness-ensuring mechanism, then we do not have an account of Christ's necessary sinlessness unless we have an account of why the Second Person necessarily, if assuming a creaturely nature, chooses to assume a nature that does not sin. *Given* the necessity of that divine choice, then, if these mechanisms are adequate to ensure sinlessness, we can take Christ's necessary sinlessness as explained. But these accounts as characterized include no explanation of the necessity of that divine choice; why God must choose in that way is something on which they are silent. And it is not as if we could remain content with saying 'well, this is where I am stopping; God necessarily chooses this'. Divine action is, unless necessitated by decisive reasons for God to act, not necessary; divine freedom requires this. So, unless we have some basis for thinking that there are decisive reasons for God to choose to make use of such mechanisms for ensuring unqualified sinlessness, we lack an adequate explanation of Christ's impeccability.

Is it also true of the Thomistic account – the account on which the enjoyment of the beatific vision in Christ's human intellect ensures that Christ's human will

cannot err – that a further divine choice is required to explain the necessity of Christ's sinlessness, and thus, lacking an account for the necessity of that choice, that view fails to explain Christ's unqualified impeccability? The reason that one might deny this is that it is a part of the standard version of this Thomistic account that the presence of the beatific vision in Christ's created intellect is not something that the Second Person must provide for in addition to providing for becoming incarnate; on the standard version – that is, Aquinas's – of the Thomistic view, the presence of the beatific vision follows inexorably from the assumption itself. If the provision of the beatific vision were something that did not follow inexorably from the Second Person's assuming of a human nature, then the Thomistic view would indeed be subject to the same criticism to which these other two views were subject: we would have to ask why it is a necessary truth that the Second Person chooses to provide the beatific vision to the intellect of any human nature assumed by that Person, and the account has nothing to say about that. But if the enjoyment of the beatific vision is part and parcel of being assumed, then no further divine choice is necessary, and Christ's unqualified impeccability is explained.

The difficulty is that even if it is true that assumption of a human nature necessitates the enjoyment of the beatific vision by the created intellect, it is entirely obscure why we should think that such a necessitation relation is present. First, the assumption of a human nature by the Second Person is something traditionally characterized as ineffable. We have very little grasp of it except by way of analogies. We know the entailments of assumption primarily by having teachings of independent authority regarding the incarnate Christ. We can say about assumption that it involves the Second Person's coming to have a human nature – but not because we have some independent grasp of what assumption is, but only because assumption is just presumed to be that relation, whatever it is, in which the divine person comes to stand to a human nature such that that human nature becomes also the divine person's nature. Second, emphasis on the separateness of Christ's divine and human minds – that each has its own proper operation, neither of which is confused with the other – seems at odds with the view that the beatific vision must, as Aquinas claims, be present in the human mind of Christ.²⁷ Third, even if it were granted for the sake of argument that the assumption of a human nature standardly results without further divine choice in the enjoyment of the beatific vision by the created intellect assumed, it would be just as plausible to hold that the presence of such a vision is no more than a defeasible implication of assumption as that it is strictly necessitated by it. The notion that the divine Person could not act so as to block, preclude, or dim the presence of the beatific vision in the created intellect seems unmotivated – the operations of the human intellect and will are supposed to be properly human, and it is hard to see how such operations could not be altered at divine discretion by the second Person, even if assumption would without further ado result in the presence of the beatific vision.²⁸ But if the presence of the beatific vision were only defeasibly

present, then Christ's sinlessness would not have been shown to be necessary, unless we have some basis to think that the second Person has decisive reasons not to choose to withdraw the beatific vision entirely, or even to dim it in such a way that it no longer precluded free choice to commit sin.

I suspect that the basis for thinking that the assumption of a human nature metaphysically necessitates the presence of the beatific vision is not any positive, independently defensible view about the nature of assumption but rather the background view that Christ's impeccability must be unqualified and so the conditions of impeccability must be entailed by the conditions of assumption. But this would mean that the Thomistic account is also a poor explanation of Christ's impeccability, even if it is true that assumption itself necessitates sinlessness. For, first, we have no independent basis for thinking that the assumption must result in the assumed created intellect's having the beatific vision. And second, it is not as if there are no alternatives to the model of Christ's impeccability on which assumption metaphysically necessitates that impeccability; there is at least one broad alternative to this model, one on which necessarily God chooses to become incarnate only under conditions in which Christ does not sin. We have not seen any such model worked out, though its possibility was revealed in looking at what the Molinist and Scotistic models needed in order to provide an adequate explanation of Christ's impeccability.

The upshot of this discussion of accounts of the mechanics of Christ's impeccability, then, is this. No such account contains the resources to provide an adequate explanation of Christ's unqualified impeccability, for even if such accounts show how it is possible for God to ensure the sinlessness of Christ's human will in a way that preserves that will's being the will of one who is fully human, they do not show why it is necessary that God will ensure the sinlessness of that will. To show that, I say, one needs to show why God must not choose to become incarnate with a sinful human will. The question of Christ's impeccability is, primarily, a question of why God has decisive reasons not to become incarnate in a sinful human nature; it is not primarily a question about how God can make sure that no nature in which God becomes incarnate ever sins.²⁹

Strategic accounts of impeccability

Some might find the upshot of the previous section entirely expected. Of course, Christ's impeccability is not best understood, they might say, in terms of the metaphysics of incarnation. Christ's being sinless is primarily not a matter of the *mechanics* of assumption, but its *objective*: Christ's unqualified sinlessness is important because of the divine purposes for which God became incarnate. It is true that for this sinlessness to be accomplished, God will have to ensure that, somehow, Christ's human will never goes awry. There are multiple models at hand, described in the previous section, that might be able to explain how this could work; and I will take for granted that an account of Christ's impeccability

may freely draw on these accounts of the mechanics of impeccability, so that if there is a necessary will in God to become incarnate only in a sinless but free nature, then necessarily God will become incarnate only in a sinless but free nature. But the basic explanation for Christ's unqualified sinlessness must begin with an account of God's being unwilling to become incarnate in a human nature with a sinful will, because becoming incarnate in a human nature with a sinful will would undermine the very purposes for becoming incarnate. Divine rationality in pursuing divine purposes, along with the availability of a way of ensuring Christ's sinlessness, entails that in any world in which God becomes incarnate in a human nature, that human nature does not ever have a sinful will; being sinless is a necessary divine strategy for realizing the purposes for which God becomes incarnate that God is necessarily able to carry out.

What is the divine purpose that explains Christ's having to be sinless? While theories of the Atonement of course differ dramatically, each fixes on the Scriptural testimony that Jesus Christ was sinless as part of the explanation of how it is that Christ's birth, life, death, and resurrection accomplish the task of overcoming a crucial obstacle to unity with God generated by human sinfulness. In order for the goals of the Atonement to be accomplished, it is required that Christ be unqualifiedly sinless, not only sinless with respect to Christ's divine nature but also with respect to Christ's human nature.

But this appeal to divine purposes does not explain Christ's impeccability. It could explain why, *given God's actual purposes in becoming incarnate*, Christ did not sin, and God would not have become incarnate in this human nature in this set of circumstances were it true that the will of that human nature would go awry in these circumstances. It does not explain, though, Christ's *necessary* sinlessness. For the necessary unqualified sinlessness of Christ could follow only if it is a necessary truth that God becomes incarnate only for the purposes of atonement with sinful creatures. But we have little reason to believe that this is true.

One of the important debates regarding the Incarnation is whether God's actually becoming incarnate was conditional on our having sinned, or whether God would have become incarnate anyway, even in the absence of our sin. Great voices in the Christian tradition have split on this issue, some holding that it is more probable to hold that God's actual purpose in becoming incarnate was to save us from sin, so that we should be inclined to deny that God would have become incarnate in the absence of human sin, and some holding that the massive variety of goods that can be realized through God's becoming incarnate makes it more probable to hold that God would have become incarnate even had humans not fallen into sin. The point that I am making is not this point, though it is related to it. I am not making any assertion about whether God's *actual* purpose in becoming incarnate was simply our salvation, nor am I holding that God *would have* become incarnate even had humans not sinned. My point is rather this: that becoming incarnate is something that is done for the sake of creatures; there seems to be a massive variety of ways in which creation

can be bettered, perfected or benefited, by incarnation; and God has massive discretion with respect to whether and how God chooses to act in ways that better creation.³⁰ So it seems very likely that God *could have* become incarnate for any such reasons, not simply those involved in making atonement possible.

If we have no basis to hold that the only divine purposes for which God could have become incarnate are for the sake of atonement, then we cannot appeal to the prerequisite *Christ's being unqualifiedly sinless* for atonement to be accomplished in order to explain the necessity of Christ's sinlessness. For if there were some other purpose which could give God sufficient reason to become incarnate other than for the purpose of atonement, and Christ's unqualified sinlessness were not essential to that purpose, then we would lack an account of why God must choose to become incarnate, if at all, only in a nature the will of which is sinless.

So I deny that a strategic account of Christ's unqualified impeccability that appeals only to God's actual purposes of accomplishing atonement can succeed. For a strategic account to succeed, it would have to give us a basis to believe that any possible adequate divine purpose in becoming incarnate would have to have among the conditions of its success Christ's being sinless. Even framing what a strategic account would have to be like to succeed is enough to make its task appear daunting. But we can make the worries more explicit.

First, of the various proposals for why God would have become incarnate even if humans had not sinned, some of these seem to be, on their face, possibly accomplished even without the unqualified sinlessness of the incarnate divine Person. Adams, chronicling an extensive mediaeval debate, catalogues a number of these.³¹ Incarnation serves the goal of completing the universe, increasing its beauty by uniting the created material world to the Godhead. It is a way for human beings to be united to the divine life, to be united not just as creatures but in a familial way with God, due to the sharing of a common nature. These aims do not, on their face, presuppose the sinlessness of the incarnate God for their realizability.

Second, and more boldly, as Adams points out, there may be ways of achieving divine purposes the accomplishment of which on their face *require* the sinfulness of the incarnate God. While this is a bold speculation, it is not the bold speculation that Christ was actually not sinless, or that given the actual path for atonement that God settled upon, Christ's sinlessness was not a prerequisite. Rather, the point is that either atonement could have been realized in a way that involves Christ's sinning or that some other purpose for becoming incarnate was eligible, and that purpose is realizable with or through Christ's sinning. With respect to the former, one might think, following Aquinas, that God could simply have forgiven us to relieve the debt of sin; while becoming incarnate was a particularly fitting way to relieve the burden of sin, it was strictly within the divine power to do so without assuming a human nature.³² Christ's becoming incarnate, then, could have served some other purpose, say an exemplarist purpose of showing us how to live. One way to be an example of how to live is to never sin; another way is to sin but to

be an example of how to respond to one's own sin through repentance. (Those who emphasize rightly that Christ is the prime example of a human life well-lived do not emphasize enough that Christ is not a good exemplar for how to respond to one's own sinful failures.³³) With respect to the latter, the goods of solidarity between God and humans could be more fully realized were Christ even more immersed in the deficiency of the human condition, not only being subject to imposed evils but the perpetrator of them as well (Adams (1999b, 98).

Now, I share with perhaps most readers who are Christians a recoil against the prospect of God's becoming incarnate in a sinful human nature. But my aim in describing the above is not to frame real possibilities of divine action justified by the goods mentioned there. My aim is, rather, to make clear that if we appeal only to strategic accounts of impeccability, then our only recourse will be to try to say why these are end-states that God could not possibly have good reason to bring about or those end-states could not possibly be brought about if Christ is even qualifiedly sinful. These seem to me to be futile tasks. The takeaway is that Christ's impeccability is not to be explained in terms of Christ's sinlessness being a prerequisite for the realization of any possible divine purpose in becoming incarnate. Rather, Christ's sinlessness will have to set a prior limit on the range of purposes that could be rationally sufficient for God to become incarnate.

Divine holiness and Christ's impeccability

We do not have good reason to believe that the mechanics of assumption necessitate the unqualified impeccability of Christ, nor do we have good reason to believe that every possible purpose God could have for becoming incarnate could be successfully accomplished only if Christ is, in both natures, sinless. I cannot give a decisive case for Christ's impeccability. But I think that an appeal to divine holiness is an extremely promising explanation available for that thesis, and clearly a better explanation than any that we have examined thus far.

In order to see the merits of this proposal, it is useful to ask what exactly we would need in order to fill the explanatory gap that we have thus far identified. The trouble is not that we lack some account of how God could see to it that Christ does not sin. The trouble is that we need some basis for believing that God must rule out of bounds any proposal for incarnation that might be accompanied by sin's being committed by the incarnate God. What seems plausible here is that there is something about sin that is repugnant to God, such that God would not be willing to stand in too close a relationship to it. If there were some plausible framework for explaining and predicting divine action that suggests that God would have strong and perhaps even decisive reason not to enter into intimate relationship with what is deficient, defective, imperfect, that would provide a basis for expecting that God would not be willing to become incarnate in a nature with a sinful will. Our having a rational basis for that expectation is enough to hold that we have an explanation of Christ's impeccability.

But there is some such plausible framework, which we can call the 'holiness' framework. This framework for conceptualizing divine action is perhaps most associated with Rudolf Otto's insight that to experience a being as holy is to experience that being as a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. We may of course be confused about what is really holy, experiencing what is not holy as holy, and experiencing what is holy as not holy. To *actually* be holy is to be a being that is *worthy* of that dual response, whose features are such as to make appropriate the *fascinans* and *tremendum* responses.³⁴ The holy is what is worthy of fascination: that is, of being attracted to, of longing for, of having 'the impulse to turn to it . . . even to make it somehow his own' in some way.³⁵ But, more importantly for our purposes, the holy is that which is worthy of a *tremendum* response: in acknowledging some being as holy, any deficient, defective, limited, imperfect being should recognize the unfittingness of being intimately related to, unified with, that being – that it is fitting for them to draw back, and fitting for the holy one to repel them. While much in Otto's theory of the holy has come in for deserved criticism, his appeal to these dual *fascinans* and *tremendum* responses has stood the test of time within Christian thought by being both well anchored in religious experience and in answering well to the notion of the holy as it is characterized in authoritative Christian texts. And multiple recent writers have appealed to this framework in attempting to characterize divine action.³⁶

On this conception of holiness, then, God – an absolutely holy being – has good reason, based on the unfittingness of deficient, defective, limited, imperfect beings to be intimately related to the absolutely perfect God, not to stand in such intimate relationship to those beings. This would, no doubt, give God strong reason not to become incarnate in a human nature at all: as God's absolute holiness makes anything deficient, defective, or imperfect unfit for standing in intimate relationship with God, and the most intimate relationship with a divine Person that a creature could have is that of being assumed by a divine Person, there are strong reasons for God not to become incarnate by assuming a creaturely nature. We cannot think that these reasons are *decisive*, if we take God to have actually become incarnate in Christ; God does not do what God has decisive reasons not to do. But if there are strong reasons for God not to become incarnate, these reasons are going to hold even more strongly with respect to becoming incarnate by taking on a nature with a sinful will.³⁷ It is an inevitability that creaturely natures will be imperfect, not being divine; and the creaturely nature of a material being like a human is as such further from perfection than the natures of rational but immaterial beings like angels. In addition, there are various deficiencies and defects exhibited by any particular substance exhibiting a creaturely nature – as Thompson notes, 'nobody's perfect'³⁸ – such that every substance will be even less fit for intimate union with the absolutely perfect being than it would be were it to realize all of the excellences appropriate to its kind; and the concretum that is Christ's human nature surely exhibited a variety of such deficiencies and defects during its earthly life, especially during the final day. The traditional thought, though,

about sin is that it is a much more radical departure from creaturely excellence, different in kind from those imperfections and privations that accompany being a creature in a sometimes inhospitable world.³⁹ Angels are far superior as a kind⁴⁰ of thing to any material being, including us humans. But the fall of the bad angels was a massive departure from their perfection, rendering them far more unfit for union with God than any mere flaw, defect, or imperfection could.

So, the proposal is this: that the radical difference in kind between sin and other sorts of imperfection and privation explains why, although God may exercise God's discretion in becoming incarnate in a limited creaturely nature, the demands of absolute holiness preclude God's becoming incarnate in a sinful creaturely nature. On this view, it is not merely a strategic decision for God to become incarnate only in natures that will not sin. Nor must we suppose that sinlessness is a necessary effect of assumption of a nature (though we can remain open to the possibility that, for reasons at least at present invisible to us, this is so). The view is, rather, that God's absolute perfection gives God reasons of holiness to become incarnate only in a sinless nature, and it is only because God somehow has the ability to ensure such sinlessness – as I noted above, I have taken God's ability to ensure sinlessness to be plausibly exhibited by the various Molinist, Scotistic, and Thomistic accounts on offer – that incarnation is a real option for God.

There is an objection to this line of argument to which I cannot give a completely satisfying reply. The objection is this: if we accept an account of divine holiness on which God has reason not to enter into intimate relationships with that which is imperfect, as well as a traditional account of the Incarnation, we are committed to the view that God can have adequate reason to enter into extraordinarily intimate relationships with what is imperfect, and so that the reasons against entering into such relationships arising from divine holiness are such that God can reasonably not act on them. And we have independent reasons from Scripture to believe that reasons of holiness do not exhaust God's reasons – God loves us, and acts on reasons of love with respect to us – so we have some idea what God's reasons are for becoming incarnate. Why, then, should we not extend this line of thought even to incarnation in a sinful nature, holding that while God has even stronger reasons against becoming incarnate in such a nature, nevertheless God might have discretion to do so? Why must we stop short and declare that God has decisive reasons not to take on a human nature with a sinful will?

I cannot show that we must stop short, and so this explanation of Christ's necessary sinlessness is not ideal. But the two points that I would insist on are these. First, it is not that there is something irrational in holding that there is a difference in kind between affirming that there can be sufficient reason for God to become incarnate at all and affirming that there can be sufficient reason for God to become incarnate in a sinful nature. A sinful nature is not just one that is deficient; it is one that stands *in opposition* to the divine perfection. So it is not as if I have picked some arbitrary stopping point or a mere difference in degree as the point at which I am suggesting that God ceases possibly to have sufficient

reason to stand in some intimate relationship with a non-divine being. Rather, the view I am proposing is that in that *most intimate of* relationships that God can stand to a creaturely nature, that creaturely nature's exhibiting the *worst kind* of flaw is a decisive reason for God not to enter into that particular relationship with that being. While I lack an account of why exactly divine discretion does not extend to there being sufficient reasons for God to assume a sinful nature, it is false that my account is arbitrary or unprincipled.

The second point is that it is not as if we have an entirely perspicuous account of why exactly there are sufficient reasons for God to become incarnate at all.⁴¹ Because God performed the action of becoming incarnate, it must be a rational action for God to perform, and so we conclude that God must therefore have at least reasons sufficient to overcome the reasons arising from holiness against becoming incarnate. I don't think that I have (or that anyone else has) a compelling argument against those who would say that an absolutely holy being could not have such sufficient reasons that is independent of the fact that an absolutely holy being *has* become incarnate; I note simply that my views on the reason-giving character of divine holiness are compatible with the possibility of what Christians otherwise take to be true, that is, that God became incarnate. Now, it is true that Christ's impeccability, unlike Christ's actual sinlessness, is less than universally affirmed among Christians. But one thing that I would invoke in favour of my account is that, for those Christians who take Christ's impeccability to be a clear teaching of, or implied by, or even suggested by the relevant authoritative sources, the explanation from divine holiness is far superior to any account that could be offered from the mechanics of assumption or the range of possible divine purposes in becoming incarnate. If one begins by taking as given that Christ is unqualifiedly impeccable, the absolute holiness account delivers a plausible explanation of why there is a normative impossibility in God's being willing to assume a sinful nature. The problem with denying Christ's impeccability is not that one can just see that assumption yields sinlessness, or that one can just see that there is no divine purpose in becoming incarnate that could be met were Christ to sin. The problem is that it is just too deeply unfitting to take the worst sort of nature – a sinful nature – into the divine Person.⁴²

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Notes

1. My assuming dyothelitism is not my assuming that it is not a puzzling doctrine! Of course in typical cases there is one will per person, so we might expect that there being two wills means that there are two persons present; but there are of course not two persons in Christ, just one person with two natures. But, unsurprisingly, Christ's is not the typical case. For but two attempts to make sense of this doctrine, see Morris (1986), 153–162 and Pawl (2016), 210–231.
2. Third Constantinople, in Tanner (1990), 128.
3. Second Nicaea, *ibid.*, 135.
4. Crisp (2007), 41.
5. Some might take this to be a counterpossible, holding that that particular individual human nature could not have existed without being assumed. Perhaps that individual human nature has its causal origin essentially, and anything with that causal origin could not exist without being assumed. Or maybe some other argument is available that establishes that conclusion (Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* [henceforth 'Aquinas (1975)'], IV, 43, 45). Nothing in my argument appeals to its being really possible that this nature could have existed unassumed. As I note below, the main lines of the argument can be run by pointing out

that there could be an intrinsic duplicate of Christ's human nature that exists unassumed, and that intrinsic duplicate would be a complete human person of a kind common to you and me.

6. Pawl (2016), 41–42.
7. *Ibid.*, 1.
8. For an argument that the concretist/abstractist distinction is no more than a terminological dispute, see Pawl (2020).
9. DeWeese (2007), Merricks (2007).
10. Murphy (2011), 47–49.
11. Crisp (2009), 135.
12. I am assuming the rejection of solutions of the sort familiar from kenotic theology throughout this article. But if one were to appeal to kenotic theology, then I say that the problem of Christ's impeccability would remain, in a different form. It would be: if it is possible for Christ to be divine though Christ does not exhibit unqualified knowledge or power, why is it not possible for Christ to be divine while sinning? As I note below, it is very difficult to explain why it is absolutely impossible that any divine purposes sufficient for incarnation could be met by there being an incarnate God who sins.
13. I cannot see why, on Crisp's view, the following argument would not be equally good: 'If God is necessarily omniscient – a view that is certainly deeply ingrained in Christian theology and spirituality, to the extent that it is the default view in the tradition – then, as a simple matter of logic, he cannot fail to know the day or the hour.' But Christ – in some sense – does not know the day or the hour. Therefore, etc.
14. Pawl (2016), 154–159.
15. As Aquinas thought (Aquinas (1975), IV, 43, 45); see also Freddoso (1986).
16. This framing of my response to Crisp takes for granted the concretist approach to incarnation and the two-wills view. Suppose that one denies one or the other of these – does that undermine my response to Crisp's view that Christ's impeccability is a nearly trivial implication of Christ's being divine? I say No. For, first, regardless of whether one is an abstractist or a concretist, one will need *some* account of Christological predication according to which features that are at odds with the divine perfection (e.g. materiality) are ascribed to Christ. And second, even if one denies that Christ has two wills, one must say that Christ has at least one will, and that will is, even if also a divine will, a human will. If it is a human will, and human wills characteristically have the capacity to go awry, then one will need some explanation of why it is impossible for *that* human will to go awry. The answer cannot be 'because it is also a divine will'. For that would be an answer that would also entail that Jesus, whose human mind would presumably also be a divine mind, must also know the day and the hour. But Jesus *can* fail to know the day and the hour. So 'because it's divine' couldn't be an adequate explanation.
17. Pawl (2019), 151–164.
18. Humans sin, not human wills. But humans sin by way of the operations of their wills, just as humans see by operation of their faculties of sight.
19. Counterfactuals of creaturely freedom are counterfactuals regarding what some free creature would do in some set of circumstances, e.g. *if Murphy were asked to review a manuscript in molecular biology, then Murphy would freely decline*. That they are 'prevolitional' means that these counterfactuals have their truth values prior to any divine willing, and so can be known by God prior to any divine choice; thus we can appeal to such counterfactuals to explain why God would (or must) or would not (or must not) make one choice rather than another regarding what circumstances to place those beings in or even whether to bring those beings into existence at all.
20. See, for example, Flint (2001). I think that Molina's actual account of impeccability relies on stronger claims than this. But the appeal to divine foreknowledge of the free operations of the will of the concrete nature assumed is the essential bit.
21. Assuming, that is, either that God does not necessarily become incarnate or that at least one human nature remains sinless if assumed.
22. Molina (1988), 53, 4, 23.
23. For Scotus's claim that the necessary sinlessness of Christ is on all fours with the necessary sinlessness of the blessed in heaven, see *Ordinatio* [= Scotus (n.d.¹)], 3.12; for his claim that the sinlessness of the blessed in heaven is due to divine intervention with respect to our free choice, see *Ordinatio* [= Scotus (n.d.²)], 4.49.
24. Morris (1986), 146–153.
25. Frankfurt (1969).

26. As I read them, the Thomistic, Scotistic, and Molinist views assume dyothelitism about Christ's will and concretism about the assumption of a human nature. As my claim is that these views do not provide an adequate explanation of Christ's impeccability, and I do not rely on any tensions between dyothelitism/concretism and their positions in order to establish this point, there is no sense that I am *relying* on dyothelitism and concretism in the argument to come.
27. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* [henceforth 'Aquinas (1981)'], III 10, 4..
28. Molina suggests that it was fitting to leave Christ's will in such a state that he be susceptible to refraining from doing God's will and that God could prevent some of the effects of the beatific vision so as to make this possible (Molina (1988), 53, 4, 22).
29. To pursue an explanation of impeccability in terms of divine reasons is not in any way to deny that the Incarnation is ineffable, as the Council of Ephesus teaches (Tanner (1990), 41). For, first, the ineffability taught by that Council is a metaphysical matter, that the nature of the union is somehow beyond our understanding. (Indeed, I relied on that sort of ineffability in calling into question the Thomistic thesis that the created intellect of Christ necessarily, in consequence of that union, has the beatific vision.) And, second, I also do not deny that there is something ineffable, normatively speaking, about the Incarnation: I do not think that we have a grasp of divine reasons for action that would show why God must become incarnate, and I even think the divine reasons against becoming incarnate are so strong that there is inevitably great wonder and mystery to God's being willing to do this for us. See n. 41 below.
30. For discussion see Murphy (2017), 70–75.
31. Adams (2004).
32. Aquinas (1981), III 1, 2.
33. Aquinas considers this issue. In support of the possibility that there was sin in Christ, he notes that 'A man needs a pattern not merely of right living, but also of repentance for sin. Therefore it seems that in Christ there ought to have been sin, that He might repent of sin, and thus afford us a pattern of repentance' (Aquinas (1981), III 15, 1, obj. 5). To which Aquinas responds that Christ gives us a model by bearing the punishment of sin not for himself but for others (*ibid.*, III 15, 1 ad 5). But while this might help to show how Christ, being sinless, might nevertheless in some way be a model for repentant human sinners, it is pretty plainly inadequate as a response to the proposal that a sinful Christ might *better* model for us what appropriate repentance looks like than a Christ who has no sins of his own for which to repent.
34. See Murphy (2018).
35. Otto (1923), 31.
36. See Adams (1999a), 86–105; Kyle (2017); and Murphy (2018).
37. The thrust of my argument here is that assumption is an intimate relationship between a perfect divine Person and a limited creaturely nature. Thus my framing of the explanation assumes concretism; that assumption is to be understood in terms of a relation to a (deficient, limited) concretum. But it is not essential to the argument that it be framed that way. If we go abstractist, we can make a similar argument. Above (n. 16) I argued that even with the abstractist understanding of the assumption, there is still a need to explain why Christ cannot sin. Even if we are abstractists, we can say the following: were Christ to sin, that would place God in a very intimate relationship to sin, something that the holiness framework suggests that God has decisive reasons not to do. So God necessarily does what God needs to do to ensure that the incarnate God does not sin. Similarly, my framing of the argument assumes dyothelitism: the concrete nature has a human will, and the holiness framework predicts that God necessarily chooses not to stand in the most of intimate of unifying relationships to any human will, if that will is sinful. But if one holds that there is just a single will in Christ, which though divine is somehow a human will as well, then the argument in a way becomes even easier to make. For it would be the divine will itself to which sin could be ascribed, and that seems entirely at odds with the demands of holiness.
38. Thompson (2008), 72.
39. Cardinal Newman:

The Catholic Church holds it better for the sun and moon to drop from heaven, for the earth to fail, and for all the many millions on it to die of starvation in extremest agony, as far as temporal affliction goes, than that one soul, I will not say, should be lost, but should commit one single venial sin, should tell one wilful untruth, or should steal one poor farthing without excuse. (Newman (1995), 221)

40. Perhaps kinds, perhaps as many as there are individual angels; see Aquinas (1981), I 50, 4.
41. Thus there is a sense in which the Incarnation remains ineffable, normatively speaking (cf. n. 29 above).
That we are told, and truly, that God did this out of love for us does not, to my mind, ease this mystery: that for the likes of human beings God is willing to humble Godself by taking on a human nature.
42. I am grateful to two anonymous referees, as well as to audiences at the Logos Institute, Purdue University, and Baylor University, for their helpful criticisms.