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Kenoticism and essential divine properties

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Abstract: Traditional Christology maintains that Christ was a single divine person with two natures (human and divine). According to kenotic Christology, certain divine properties such as omniscience and omnipotence were divested in order for Christ to acquire essential human properties. However, such a view appears to conflict with perfect-being theology, which takes omniscience and omnipotence to be essential properties for being divine. I propose a view that adopts a Thomistic theory of essences in order to show that there need be no conflict, and hence Christ can give up the property of being omniscient while still being essentially omniscient.

The doctrine of the Incarnation maintains that God the Son became human, and traditional orthodoxy requires an account in which there is one person, viz. Christ, with two natures, human and divine. One way of understanding this is to claim that Christ has all of the essential properties of being divine and all of the essential properties of being human.[1] A central philosophical concern regarding the incarnation involves explaining how such a doctrine can be logically coherent. For it appears that the essential properties of being divine include being omnipotent, omniscient, incorporeal, and so forth. It's less clear what the essential properties are for being human. Some have argued that being limited in knowledge is not an essential property of being a human, and so a human can be omniscient (Morris (1986)). And some versions of substance dualism maintain that having an immaterial soul is an essential property of being human, whereas having a body is not – and hence a human being can exist incorporeally (Swinburne (1997); *Idem* (2013)). However, Christ is depicted in Scripture as being limited in knowledge and being corporeal (at least partly). Hence, it seems that traditional Christians must accept, among other things, that Christ is both omniscient and not-omniscient, which appears to be contradictory.[2]

One way of trying to avoid the charge of incoherence is to adopt a kenotic Christology. Inspired by Philippians 2:5–11, kenotic theorists maintain that God the Son emptied himself of certain divine properties so that he could acquire certain human properties (at least the ones that Christ is represented as having in the New Testament). Early kenoticists of the nineteenth century suggested that God the Son divested his divinity or some of his essential divine properties, though such views amount to an abandonment of the pronouncements made in the Council of Chalcedon. However, recent kenotic theorists have desired to stay within the boundaries set by Chalcedon and so have argued that Christ is divine and therefore possesses all of the essential properties for being divine. But even while retaining the essential divine properties, kenotic theorists insist that God the Son divested himself of the properties of omniscience, omnipotence, and so forth. Contrary to a common analysis of divinity, most kenotic theorists argue that these properties are not essential for being truly divine.[3]

A major worry for the kenotic approach is its apparent conflict with Anselmian perfect-being theology, which accepts omnipotence and omniscience (and the like) as essential for being divine; for it seems that a being that is not essentially omniscient and not essentially omnipotent would not count as the greatest conceivable being. Hence, a kenotic theorist may be forced to abandon perfect-being theology. This should be a concern because some kenotic theorists accept an Anselmian ontological argument that employs the concept of a greatest conceivable being (for example, see Davis (2003)).

In this article, I hope to show that kenotic Christology does not have to abandon perfect-being theology, or at least the part which claims that attributes such as omnipotence or omniscience are essential divine properties. After raising the initial tension between the two, I briefly discuss some of the current strategies adopted by proponents of kenotic Christology and explain why they are either problematic or incomplete. I then propose a view in which the kenotic theorist can coherently assert that Christ is essentially omnipotent, essentially omniscient, and so forth. Hence, kenotic Christology is compatible with perfect-being theology at least on that score.[4]

Kenotic accounts

Kenotic theorists do not all agree which of the standard divine attributes God the Son divested when he became incarnate. Given the way Christ is portrayed in the New Testament documents, many kenotic theorists hold that the incarnate Christ was at the very least no longer omnipotent, omniscient, and wholly incorporeal. Nevertheless, they claim that Christ was in possession of the essential divine attributes and so was truly divine (and I will lay out some of the kenotic strategies for maintaining these claims). With the relevant divine attributes given up, God the Son was able to acquire all of the properties essential to being human, and hence Christ can be said to be both truly divine and truly human.

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According to some kenotic theorists, there are some divine attributes that are 'ungiveupable' (Davis (2011), 122),[5] and insofar as such attributes conflict with essential human properties, the kenotic theorist may have to rely on other approaches to the incarnation in order to resolve the alleged incompatibility.[6] This may not be too problematic, especially since some kenotic theorists aver that there is no single solution to dealing with the charge of incoherence (Senor (2011), 112).

A serious worry, however, is the alleged tension between the kenotic approach and an Anselmian perfect-being theology. Thomas Morris, a critic of the kenotic approach, states the worry as follows:

> [T]his kenotic view represents a perspective on deity which is not clearly in accord with an Anselmian conception of God. For there can be Anselmian intuitions that it is better to be absolutely immune to states of avoidable ignorance than to be capable of such states, and thus that it is omniscience *simpliciter* which is a requisite of deity, as well as a property any particular divine being must have essentially. (Morris (1986), 101)[7]

So proponents of an Anselmian perfect-being theology claim that properties such as omniscience and omnipotence are essential to being divine, since a being that is not essentially omniscient and not essentially omnipotent would not be the greatest conceivable being – for we could conceive of a being greater than that, viz. a being that had all the same features but that was also essentially omniscient and essentially omnipotent.

Kenotic theorists will admit to God the Son's divestiture of omnipotence and omniscience (and other divine attributes), but there is disagreement about what is retained that is essential for divinity. The typical strategy has been to claim that omnipotence and omniscience are not essential divine properties and to propose alternative attributes as being essential for divinity (and claiming that God the Son retained those attributes in the incarnation). In what follows, I will present some of the options that have been offered by kenotic theorists.

Following a suggestion by Morris (1986), Davis (2006; 2011) claims that it is not the property of omniscience that is essential for divinity but rather the more complex property of being *omniscient-unless-freely-and-temporarily-choosing-to-be-otherwise*. A divine being that can become incarnate has both the property of being omniscient and the property of being omniscient-unless-freely-and-temporarily-choosing-to-be-otherwise, and only the former is given up in the incarnation. The similarity of the two attributes might lead us to believe that omniscience is essential for divinity, but the incarnation shows us that it is only the latter attribute that is essential. And the same goes for the other divine attributes that are given up in the incarnation. Since Christ can be both limited in knowledge and in possession of the property of being omniscient-unless-freely-and-temporarily-choosing-to-be-otherwise, there is no incoherence here.

One obvious concern for this approach is that such essential divine properties appear gerrymandered and do not seem to be fundamental – they don't 'carve

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nature at its joints' (so to speak). This may not be too worrisome for those who think that we cannot know what the divine essence is really like or for those who embrace an apophatic approach where nothing that is said of God is fundamental or joint-carving.[8] But such manoeuvres may not be available for those who prefer univocal predications or insist on our ability to state some fundamental features about God (whether such statements are analogical or univocal).[9] Nevertheless, the heart of the worry with Davis's strategy, as Senor notes, is that learning 'something about divinity from the incarnation is fully appropriate, but one might have hoped that what we learn would be more general or maybe even deeper than the simple addition of a caveat clause on the traditional attribute' (Senor (2011), 106).

Without adopting the disjunctive clause, Senor similarly claims that omnipotence or omniscience should not be regarded as essential properties. Instead, they are to be treated as *ceteris paribus* divine properties – properties that are common for members of a certain kind to possess. According to Senor,

> We should think of divinity as a supernatural kind. To be divine is to have whatever it is that is at the essence of the being who created the world and became incarnate in Jesus Christ . . . The standard divine attributes are not, then, fundamental essential properties but are standard properties of divinity: they are properties that a being with that essence will paradigmatically instantiate. (*ibid*., 108)

Christ, then, falls under the (supernatural) kind *being divine*. Being a member of this kind is what grounds the other divine attributions, some of which are essential but derivative (such as being the ground of all being or being necessarily existent) whereas others will be *ceteris paribus* but not essential to being a member of that kind. Just as living on the surface of the earth is a *ceteris paribus* property possessed by virtually all human beings, it is not essential for being human. Similarly, Senor claims that omniscience is not an essential property but a *ceteris paribus* property, one that divine beings will typically instantiate but which is not necessary for them to do so.

Although this approach seems promising, the problem is that it is incomplete, for it does not tell us what it takes for something to fall under the kind *divinity*. The natural answer would be to say that it is being in possession of certain divine attributes, but Senor would reject that answer since he wants to flip the ontological priority (first comes the kind, then comes the properties). By doing so, there does not seem to be any explanation for kind-membership, and positing it as a brute fact seems unpromising. This doesn't provide a knock-down objection, but more work needs to be done in order to show that Senor's kenotic account can deliver what it promises.

Another option is to claim that Christ does not actually give up the divine properties but instead merely gives up a mode or way of having those properties. For example, Archer (2018) suggests that in the incarnation, Christ is omniscient insofar as he dispositionally knows all true propositions, but Christ is not

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omniscient insofar as he does not occurrently know all true propositions. Under this account, Christ does not actually give up being omniscient but only gives up a way of being omniscient; in particular he gives up occurrently knowing all true propositions. For this reason, Archer labels his view 'semi-kenoticism', especially since the attribute is not divested but only a way of having that attribute is given up. The upshot of his account is that it allows us to regard Christ as essentially omniscient, in keeping with perfect-being theology. However, this view does not appear to be kenotic at all, since there is no divestiture of divine properties – Christ is still omniscient under semi-kenoticism. In fact, Archer's account seems to be closer to so-called 'kryptic' models of the Incarnation than it does to a modified version of kenoticism. However, the main concern with this view is that it does not generalize to the other divine properties, especially since it doesn't make much sense to say that Christ is dispositionally but not occurrently omnipotent, as some have argued that being dispositionally omnipotent just is being omnipotent (i.e. having the power to acquire the power to *F* is equivalent to having the power to *F*). So this account doesn't help the kenotic theorist get very far in addressing the worry of logical incoherence.

Thomistic essentialism and kenoticism

Aside from semi-kenoticism, it is evident that the kenotic theories discussed so far suggest that Christ is not essentially omniscient. And all extant kenotic theories (full and semi-) maintain that Christ is not essentially omnipotent. However, there appears to be a way in which kenotic theorists can maintain that Christ is essentially omniscient and essentially omnipotent (and the like), and they can do so while being fully kenotic by affirming that Christ divested himself of omniscience and omnipotence (and the like).

This may appear initially incoherent, but it only is so under a common modal analysis of essences or essential properties, which Jeffrey Brower labels the 'naïve conception of natures' (Brower (2014), 297):

> [E] If x is essentially F, then x cannot cease to be F without ceasing to exist.

And [E] is often understood in terms of possible worlds, such that the consequent can be read as 'there is no possible world such that x exists in that world and x is not-F'. Thus, if in the actual world God exists and is not omniscient, then God is not essentially omniscient. However, there have been recent objections raised against a possible-worlds or modal interpretation of essences,[10] and some have argued that essences should be understood in terms of the powers of objects in the actual world and not about what goes on in other possible worlds.[11]

Along these lines, Jeffrey Brower has recently argued that Aquinas would reject [E], especially when considering the survival of human persons in the intermediate state (that is, the disembodied state after death and before the resurrection).

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Rather, Aquinas appears to construe essences or natures in terms of natural dispositions:

> It belongs to the very nature of the soul to be united to the body in the same way that it belongs to the very nature of a lightweight body to be elevated. But a lightweight body remains lightweight even when separated from its proper place. For *it remains directed toward its proper place by a disposition and inclination*. Likewise, the human soul remains a soul in its nature when it has been separated from the body, insofar as *it has a natural disposition and inclination* for union with the body. (*Summa Theologiae* I.76.1 ad 6; italics mine)

Hence, the view of essences (or natures) that Aquinas holds, according to Brower, is the following (Brower (2014), 299):

> [T] If x is essentially F, and F-ness is x's primary nature, then x is non-contingently disposed to be F (and hence such that x cannot permanently cease to be F without ceasing to exist).

A separated soul, then, is essentially embodied insofar as it is naturally disposed towards embodiment (or more accurately for Aquinas, en-matter-ment), though for a time it is not actually embodied in the intermediate state. Hence, Brower describes Aquinas's view as follows:

> [A]ll human beings, whether divine or not, cease to be *actually* human between death and resurrection – because they cease to possess a soul united to matter – but nonetheless continue to be *essentially* human – because they continue to possess a soul that is non-contingently disposed to be united to matter, and hence a natural disposition to be actually human. (*ibid.*, 300)

This theory of essences allows for some attribute F to be the essence (or part of the essence) of some object, even though there can be a time in which that object is not F. This may seem problematic only to those who uphold [E] or some other modal conception of essences. However, Aristotelian or Thomistic approaches (or at least, certain interpretations thereof) need not understand essences in terms of what the object is like in other possible worlds or at other times. Rather, it may be due to a metaphysical constituent of an object, such as its form, that grounds (or just is) that object's essence and provides the object with certain natural dispositions.

With this account of essences at hand, the kenotic theorist has a way of retaining omnipotence and omniscience as essential divine attributes. Even if God the Son divests himself of omnipotence and omniscience, God the Son is nevertheless naturally disposed to being omnipotent and omniscient since being divine is Christ's primary nature. Christ, as the Chalcedonian definition tells us, has two natures – a divine nature and a human nature. But the divine nature, we might say, has ontic priority (as well as temporal priority). Christ existed and was divine prior to the incarnation. Christ instantiates all the properties that are essential for being human, but Christ does not have a single nature (such as a *theanthropic* nature) since that would be the heresy of monophysitism, which is ruled out by conciliar pronouncements. Even though Christ has a human nature, it seems more

appropriate not to call him a human person but a divine person with a human nature (and a divine nature), especially since the divine person that existed prior to the incarnation persists after the incarnation.[12] Hence, Christ's primary kind is his divinity, and hence he is naturally disposed to those properties that comprise his essence such as omniscience and omnipotence.

So a kenotic theorist who accepts [T] can reconcile her theory with perfect-being theology, for Christ is essentially omnipotent and essentially omniscient insofar as Christ is naturally disposed to possessing those properties. Nevertheless, the kenotic theorist need not move towards semi-kenoticism since she can maintain that Christ does indeed empty himself of omnipotence and omniscience. But given the way Christ is naturally disposed during his incarnation, [T] allows the kenotic theorist to claim that such properties are nevertheless essential to him.

For human persons, death is an unnatural state since a human person's natural state is to be embodied (i.e. to have a soul/substantial-form informing matter). However, such a separated soul is naturally disposed to having a body (or informing matter) and will eventually be reunited with a body (or with matter). Similarly, Christ's incarnation, according to kenotic Christology, is an unnatural state (in the relevant sense) since a divine being's natural state is to be omnipotent and omniscient. Therefore, the kenotic theorist who adopts Thomistic essentialism as understood in [T] fits better with those kenotic views which claim that Christ reacquired the divine properties in his state of glorification. Given that it is natural for Christ to be omnipotent, it is fitting (in the mediaeval sense of *convenientia*) that he should become omnipotent once more in his glorified state. That said, there are kenotic theories which hold that Christ's divestiture of omniscience and omnipotence is permanent (such as the kenotic theory in Evans (2002)), and it seems possible for such views to endorse [T], as long as it is possible for Christ to be always disposed to being omniscient and omnipotent even though he will never reacquire such properties.[13] But the conjunction of [T] and kenotic Christology seems to fit better with the versions in which Christ does reacquire those properties, especially for those who maintain that a natural disposition for being divine should eventually be manifested and not forever frustrated.

One may worry that the proposal offered here is problematic in a way that is similar to the concern raised against Senor's account.[14] Recall that in his version of kenoticism, we are not told what it is that makes something fall under the kind divinity and how it is that divinity grounds the relevant *ceteris paribus* properties. But if the Thomistic essentialist version of Christology merely states that being divine is whatever it is that grounds being disposed to being omniscient, then it appears that Senor's account can make the same move. However, there is a relevant difference between these two approaches, especially if we think of dispositions as powers that tend towards their manifestation – and hence there is an intimate link between a power and its manifestation(s).[15] In the case of kenotic Christology, there is an intimate link between being disposed to being omniscient and being omniscient given the nature of powers, which is lacking in Senor's

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discussion of the kind divinity and the relevant properties that flow from that kind. Hence, we can think of [T] as providing a fuller account that is complementary to Senor's approach given its employment of the notion of dispositions.

The advantage of the proposed kenotic theory is that it allows kenotic theorists to affirm with perfect-being theology that Christ is essentially omniscient and essentially omnipotent. Hence, a kenotic theorist need not appeal to complex or non-fundamental properties such as being omniscient-unless-freely-and-temporarily-choosing-to-be-otherwise. Nor need she appeal to some mysterious supernatural kind (of which nothing explains why one belongs to such a kind) that grounds the *ceteris paribus* divine properties. Moreover, kenoticists can still hold to a full-blown version of kenoticism in which Christ freely gives up omniscience and omnipotence and so need not endorse a semi-kenoticism in which the relevant properties are not actually divested. Under the proposed account, kenotic theorists can claim that Christ really does empty himself of these divine properties while still being essentially omniscient and essentially omnipotent. And contra semi-kenoticism (as advanced by Archer), this account generalizes to other divested divine attributes besides omniscience.[16]

Now one may object by stating a preference for a modal or possible-worlds (or some other) interpretation of essence. However, we must remember what the task is in providing an account of the incarnation, which is merely to provide a logically coherent account. Hence, one need not actually endorse [T]. As long as [T] is a coherent account of essences, then there is a coherent story in which God the Son became a human being by giving up certain divine properties – and such a story does not conflict with perfect-being theology since the divine essence is intact because Christ remains naturally disposed to possess those properties that were given up in the incarnation. Hence, kenotic theorists wanting to maintain a perfect-being theology in which Christ is essentially omniscient and essentially omnipotent should consider taking seriously Thomistic essentialism.[17]

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Notes

1. This way of describing it fits with the so-called *abstractist* approach, which treats natures as abstract properties, as opposed to the *concretist* approach, which treats natures as concrete entities (where the concrete human nature is typically construed as a soul–body composite). For more on this distinction, see (Plantinga (1999)).
2. Recently, Pawl (2016) has argued that this pair and other pairs – such as omnipotence vs limited-power, immutability vs mutability, etc. – are not in fact incompatible when the truth conditions of such predications are properly analysed.
3. Davis (2011, 120) claims that being omniscient, though not essential for being *truly* divine, is a property of being divine *simpliciter* (i.e. being divine without also being human or anything else), and hence the incarnate Christ is truly divine but post-incarnation is not divine simpliciter.
4. I should note that I do not endorse a kenotic approach to Christology, but that is consistent with my thesis.
5. For example, attributes such as *being uncreated* or *being the creator of the heavens and the earth* (as well as time-indexed properties). For more on this, see Davis (2006), 118–119.
6. Moreover, Davis claims that Christ reacquires the divine properties of being omnipotent and omniscient (and the like) at his glorification. So if the glorified Christ is now omnipotent and also human, then a non-kenotic strategy will also be required for maintaining both set of attributes. Davis (2011) himself prefers a *qua*-approach that modifies the subject, similar to the view advanced in Stump (2003), ch. 14.
7. For more on this alleged conflict between kenotic Christology and perfect-being theology, see Hick (1988), 68 and Senor (2011), 103–107.
8. For the latter approach, see Jacobs (2015).
9. This move would not be available to a kenotic theorist such as Davis (2017), who maintains that we can state some of the fundamental features of God.
10. For example, see Fine (1994).
11. For one example, see Jacobs (2010).
12. This is not to claim that Christ cannot be labelled as a human person, but only that it would be more perspicuous to maintain Christ as a divine person with a human and a divine nature, which would emphasize the ontic and temporal priority of Christ's divinity.
13. This move also requires rejecting the parenthetical remarks in [T] as following from this dispositional analysis of essences.
14. Thanks to the anonymous reviewer for pressing this point.
15. Of course much more needs to be said about a power's ontology. For more, see Mumford & Anjum (2011).
16. An anonymous reviewer raises a worry that the Thomistic essentialist version of kenotic Christology runs into a similar problem with Archer's semi-kenoticism insofar as it does not extend to other divine properties, especially divine omnipotence – for the claim was that being disposed to being omnipotent is equivalent to being omnipotent. In response, I suggest that the term 'disposed' is being used equivocally here. In Archer's case, especially in the context of discussing knowledge, having dispositional knowledge is having latent or stored knowledge that one is capable of accessing. So having dispositional power would be similar – for example, my dispositional power to speak a non-English language, which I am not

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exercising now but could employ. With regard to [T], the notion of disposition is a tendency towards a manifestation, but there may be factors that prevent or preclude the manifestation. In the case of humans in the intermediate state, the lack of matter prevents the manifestation of perceptual or biological powers (which are still present in the human soul). In the case of Christ, given his divine nature, he has a tendency towards omnipotence but is unable to be omnipotent unless some other condition obtains (e.g. Christ cannot regain divested divine properties unless the Father reinstates the relevant properties to the glorified Son). So in the case of Thomistic essentialist kenoticism, being disposed to being omnipotent is not equivalent to being omnipotent.

17. Many thanks to an anonymous reviewer for helpful comments on an earlier draft. I am especially indebted to Steve Davis for the many hours we spent discussing Christology as well as helpful feedback on an earlier draft.