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Remembering the Word: A Decentered Approach to Two-Natures Christology

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Abstract

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By Rebecca L. Copeland

This dissertation argues that anthropocentric assumptions have distorted the development of both conciliar christology and the challenges raised against it. By bringing the liberation hermeneutics of Delores Williams and Norman Habel into conversation with the field of biomimicry, the author develops ecomimetic interpretation as a hermeneutical strategy to resist anthropocentric biases, and then applies this strategy to the doctrine of the incarnation. This approach involves paying close attention to the lives of various creatures and engaging the perspectives of these creatures while temporarily bracketing out particularly human questions. Using this interpretive strategy, this dissertation argues that challenges to the coherence and plausibility of conciliar christology are best addressed by revisiting what the ecumenical councils meant when they stated that Christ was "*homoousios* (consubstantial) with the Father as to his divinity" and "*homoousios* (consubstantial) with us as to his humanity." These claims lay the foundation for understanding all of reality to be composed of two *ousiai*, or 'essences'—that of the Creator and that of the created. After examining the "perspectives" of four non-human creatures, the author offers a provisional understanding of created *ousia* as characterized by the interplay of stability and transformation, individual integrity and interdependence. This dissertation then brings that definition into conversation with the christological debates. The author responds to challenges to the plausibility of conciliar christology by recasting the incarnation as the foundation of material existence. On this foundation, the primary work of the incarnation is accomplished objectively by the incarnation itself, rather than subjectively as the cognitive appropriation of revelation. This interpretation serves the soteriological concerns of the ecumenical councils, affirms the ontological distinction between the Creator and the created that Christians have traditionally affirmed, and resists the human exceptionalism that has used the incarnation to justify unsustainable exploitation of the environment.

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Table of Contents

Introduction

In 1966, Lynn White, Jr. delivered a lecture at the American Association for the Advancement of Science blaming Christianity, and the anthropocentrism contained therein, for the ecological crises that we are facing in the modern era.[1] When White blamed Christianity's anthropocentrism for his generation's ecological troubles, it was assumed that anthropocentrism was an easily understood and monolithic evil.[2] It was also assumed that the harms of anthropocentrism were predominantly ecological.[3] In contrast, this work begins with the presuppositions that anthropocentrism is a natural bias that becomes harmful when it is accepted without further interrogation, and further, that the harms of anthropocentrism encompass theological distortions as well as ecologically harmful behaviors.

Human beings interpret the world from particular perspectives. We have biases that we have inherited from our families and larger societies. Because Christian theology, like religion more generally, is a human endeavor, its development is influenced by these biases. While having biases is completely natural, human beings have the capacity to recognize and resist biases that distort our understanding of the world in harmful ways.[4]

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[1] Later published in the journal, *Science*, see Lynn White Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science*, March 10, 1967.

[2] This assumption undergirded the response of numerous Christians who attempted to defend Christianity by showing that it possesses ecological wisdom of its own, or at least that it was no more anthropocentric than other religions.

[3] Proponents of ecological hermeneutics have offered many proposals for making Christianity more ecologically sensitive. Fewer have recognized, however, that anthropocentrism creates theological issues beyond the self-destructive framework it has constructed for human beings to relate to the rest of the world. While cognizant of the ecological issues at stake, this work focuses more on the theological harms of unexamined anthropocentrism.

[4] Hans-Georg Gadamer argues that prejudice is a key component of understanding, while also acknowledging "the tyranny of hidden prejudices that make us deaf to the language that speaks to us in tradition," *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum, 1975), 239. My hermeneutical starting point agrees with his claim that, "The important thing is to be aware of one's own bias, so that the text may present itself in all its newness and thus be able to assert its own truth against one's own fore-meanings," 238.

Such resistance, however, requires both attention and intention. Something must interrupt our habitual interpretations, calling the harmful distortions to our attention. In reaction to this interruption, we must intentionally decide to resist those biases we have come to see as harmful and adopt strategies that enable us to perceive what we are interpreting in new ways. Liberation theologies have demonstrated that recognizing, critiquing, and resisting biases associated with gender, race, and socio-economic position can lead to theological reconstructions that fruitfully engage perspectives that had been excluded from discussion in the past. This present work draws from and builds upon these efforts in order to identify, critique, and resist anthropocentric biases that have shaped Christian doctrine.

In the same way that increased awareness of gendered and racial oppression has interrupted the biases of privileged perspectives that excluded the voices of women and minorities, thereby opening space for liberation theologies to participate in the reformation of Christian doctrine, so ecological crises should interrupt the bias of anthropocentrism and open a space for Christianity to take species that are other-than-human into theological account. In the half century since White's address, our ecological crises have become ever more acute: anthropogenic climate change, pollution of air, water, and soil, devastating erosion of topsoil, and unsustainable farming practices all threaten human flourishing, as well as the survival of countless other species. From the colony collapse disorder that threatens the pollinators upon whom agriculture depends, to the current amphibian extinction crisis, we appear to be entering the sixth period of mass extinction this planet has experienced since life emerged over three billion years ago.[5]

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[5] It is not my intention to re-argue all of the ecological harms that human beings have caused. For summaries of such harms, see Roger Gottlieb, "Introduction: Religion and ecology—What Is the

These crises interrupt our habitual ways of understanding the relationship of human beings to the rest of this planet. They call to attention the harmfulness of modern Western ways of interpreting the world, and our place in it.

In response to this interruption, this work offers a strategy for resisting anthropocentric biases in the interpretation of religious texts and traditions, and applies this strategy to the Christian doctrine of the incarnation. It is my argument that (1) interpretations of the doctrine of the incarnation have been distorted by anthropocentric biases; (2) these distortions lead to further theological and ethical problems; (3) Christians can resist these biases by deeply engaging other creaturely perspectives in our interpretations of the doctrine; and (4) doing so will yield both theological and ethical benefits.[6] This introduction begins by exploring the concept of anthropocentrism in order to offer a nuanced understanding of both its interpretive importance and its different facets. Next, I will offer the concepts of species-humility and attention epistemology as the foundation for my methodological approach (ideas that will be developed more fully in Chapter 2). Finally, I will offer my reasons for focusing on the doctrine of the incarnation.

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connection and Why Does it Matter," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) 3-21; Sallie McFague, *A New Climate for Theology: God, the World, and Global Warming* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008) 9-26; David Horrell, *The Bible and the Environment: Towards a Critical Ecological Biblical Theology* (London: Routledge, 2010) 3-10. For accessible discussions of anthropogenic climate change and mass extinction, see also Tim Flannery, *The Weather Makers: How Man is Changing the Climate and What it Means for Life on Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 2005), and Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* (New York: Picador, 2014).

[6] While I recognize that in common usage the term "creature" is reserved for animate beings, I am using the term theologically to refer to created existents. This includes inanimate material bodies as well as plants, animals, and other living things.

Anthropocentrism

Over the last fifty years, Christian thinkers have come to recognize that anthropocentrism is a more complex phenomenon than White suggested with his blanket condemnation. In this section, I will first introduce two categories of critiques to be made against anthropocentrism, one ecological and the other theological. I will then develop a more nuanced terminology for examining anthropocentrism.

Ecological Critique

The ecological critique of anthropocentrism involves the harms that human actions have inflicted on the rest of the world, particularly when those actions are only restrained by anthropocentric ethical concerns. For the majority of the time that human beings have walked the earth, nature seemed to be an inexhaustible resource. If something was valuable for human beings, we simply took as much of that something as we wanted. So long as the human population and its ability to extract resources stayed below a certain threshold, this occurred without much disturbance to the resilience of the ecosystem.[7] However, when the extraction of certain resources exceeds the ability of the ecosystem to replenish those resources, systems collapse. This can happen because the number of people extracting resources has grown, because their technology has increased their proficiency at resource extraction, or both.[8] This can be seen in the American dustbowl, deforestation, and the fishery collapses of the North Atlantic. Human management of ecological systems attempts to limit how, when, and by whom a resource can be harvested in order to safeguard the continued resilience of the ecosystem, and thus

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[7] Ecosystem resilience is the amount of disturbance an ecosystem can absorb while still maintaining its functions as a particular ecological regime before "flipping" to another one (i.e. from grassland to desert).
[8] For several examples, see Jared Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (New York: Viking, 2005).

the continued productivity of the resources being harvested.[9] Modern scientific natural

resource management is based on the desire for maximum sustainable yields—calculating

the maximum amount that can be harvested without destroying the system's resilience.

The concept of maximum sustainable yields assumes that human beings are

capable of calculating the amounts that can be harvested without jeopardizing the

ongoing existence of the resource base in question. It assumes that human beings are

aware of every variable that can impact those calculations and that all of those variables

are taken into account. It assumes that everyone abides by the policies set forth.

However, experience demonstrates that anthropocentric perspectives obscure important

environmental considerations while fostering overconfidence in human abilities to predict

and mitigate harmful consequence. Anthropocentric approaches to environmental

management may ultimately harm human interests because they focus on simple and

immediate needs (and wants) while obscuring the complex ecological interactions that

affect human abilities to meet those needs. Holling, Gunderson, and Ludwig provide

several examples of such failures, including the collapse of fisheries, chronic pest

outbreaks (ironically) brought about by chemical pest control, and the loss of ecosystem

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[9] Because human beings are dependent on other parts of creation for our survival and flourishing, the ecological critique of anthropocentric activities need not be divorced from human interests in the continued flourishing of our species. See Patrick Frierson, "Metastandards in the Ethics of Adam Smith and Aldo Leopold," *Environmental Ethics* 29:2 (Summer 2007) 171-191, for further discussion of how anthropocentric concerns can support the adoption of biocentric ethics. While I will argue in later chapters that the intrinsic value of all creatures should make them objects of ethical concern in their own rights, in this section I appeal to humanity's rational self-interest, which should make the continued flourishing of the ecosystems on which we depend an ethical priority, even if the reader does not concur with my assumption about the intrinsic value of all creatures.

and economic resilience that has accompanied flood control and irrigation efforts.[10]

According to Holling, et al., these failures are rooted in the same management blunder:

> In each case, a target variable (fish stock, meat production, pest control, or water level) is identified and successfully controlled…We now know that the stabilization of target variables like these leads to slow changes in other ecological, social, and cultural components—changes that can ultimately lead to the collapse of the entire system…Pest control leads to more luxuriant growth of the host plants and hence creates more favorable conditions for survival and reproduction of the pest. Effective flood control leads to higher human settlement densities in the fertile valleys and a large investment in vulnerable infrastructure. When a large flood eventually overwhelms the dams and dikes, the result is often a dramatic reconfiguration of the social and economic landscape along the river.[11]

Anthropocentric hubris leads to the belief that controlling a few known variables is the same as mastering the ecosystem. Human inability to take into account—or even know— all of the variables that shape ecosystems, however, means that such control actually makes the behavior of the system less predictable in many cases.

At the same time, anthropocentric approaches bolster an overconfidence in the human ability to foresee and forestall coming problems. Human exceptionalism is often based on human cognitive abilities to think abstractly and contemplate the future. These capacities, however, are not as well-developed as we like to think. Studies have shown that "People have great difficult solving problems that involve multiple time scales…slowly changing variables and time horizons of years."[12] Environmental systems change in time horizons of decades, centuries, and millennia. The combination of a high estimation of human abilities and the limitations of those actual abilities means that

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[10] Holling, C.S., Lance H. Gunderson, and Donald Ludwig, "In Quest of a Theory of Adaptive Change," in *Panarchy: Understanding Transformations in Human and Natural Systems*, Lance H. Gunderson and C.S. Holling, eds. (Washington: Island Press, 2002) 5-6.

[11] Holling, Gunderson, and Ludwig, 6.

[12] Frances Westley, Steven R. Carpenter, William A. Brock, C.S. Holling, and Lance Gunderson, "Systems of People and Nature," in *Panarchy*, 113.

anthropocentric management decisions often push ecosystems beyond their capacities, leading to system collapses.

Natural resource management disasters cannot be avoided by building better models or developing human predictive capacities. While ecosystems do possess varying degrees of resilience they are also subject to both evolutionary forces and random events. Because these lead to genuine novelty, they cannot be factored into management decisions. All of these limitations indicate the need for a model of human/other-than-human interaction that can serve as an alternative to the model of natural resources for human use. The uncertainty involved in transforming ecological systems requires the use of non-anthropocentric perspectives that focus on risks to material bodies other than human beings. The need for such alternative models and perspectives creates a space for adherents of deep ecology and many of the world religions to find common ground. An anthropocentric desire to protect human survival and flourishing above all else will be poorly served by adopting an ethical standpoint that protects human flourishing at the expense of all else. An anthropocentric ethical standard would allow the destruction of both species and habitats in the service of human desires until this planet was no longer habitable. An ecocentric ethical standard, however, takes the survival of different species and ecosystems into account in making ethical decisions—species and ecosystems that are necessary for human flourishing. As Partrick Frierson observes, "having an ethical code…that refuses to let human (or sentient) interests trump the good of ecological wholes is itself good for humans and other sentient creatures."[13] Although anthropocentrism initially helped human beings to survive and flourish, in the context of

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[13] Frierson, 186.

a population of over seven billion people who possess the power to destroy the world many times over it now threatens our continued survival on this planet.

Theological Critique

In addition to the ecological critique that anthropocentric actions threaten the physical survival and flourishing of human beings, a specifically theological critique argues that anthropocentrism obscures an important source of revelation while distorting our understandings of proper human relationships to God and the world. Christians have long held that the natural world, as God's creation, manifests God's goodness in a variety of ways. This can be seen in the Psalmist's declaration that

> The heavens are telling the glory of God;
> and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.
> Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge.
> There is no speech, nor are there words;
> their voice is not heard;
> yet their voice goes out through all the earth,
> and their words to the end of the world (Ps 19:1-4)

Day, night, earth, and sky reveal God's glory and work. In Romans, Paul argues that this natural revelation leaves human beings without excuse for impiety: "Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made" (Rom 1:20). This revelation is available to all—including those who have not received any form of religious instruction. Augustine took up the idea of creation as revelation, claiming that "there is a certain great big book, the book of created nature. Look carefully at it top and bottom, observe it, read it. God did not make letters of ink for you to recognize him in; he set before your eyes all

these things he has made. Why look for a louder voice? Heaven and earth cries out to you, 'God made me.'"[14]

Scripture further portrays the natural world as a kind of tutor to human beings. Proverbs urges the lazybones to look to the ant, and Jesus directs his followers' attention to the lilies of the field and the birds of the air.[15] Like scripture, the natural world both reveals its Creator and serves to teach human beings, but human beings miss or misunderstand that revelation when they only view the world through anthropocentric lenses. By focusing only on what directly impacts human well-being, anthropocentrism fosters this disregard of other creatures. Many human beings simply do not pay attention to the other parts of creation that surround them, and thus overlook a multitude of manifestations of God's glory. Martin Luther recognized that, "If you were to search out everything about a kernel of wheat in the field, you would be so amazed that you would die," while also acknowledging that the human gaze can take in a thousand kernels at a time.[16] Sometimes we overlook the wonder of the individual in our desire to comprehend the whole. What might be learned from adopting the perspective of a sparrow is something very different from what can be learned by superficial attention given to one or two of its characteristics. I will develop this argument about the epistemic value of engaging other creaturely perspectives in more detail in Chapter 2.

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[14] Augustine, "Sermons," 68, 6, in *The Works of Saint Augustine (2nd Release)*, Roland J. Teske, John E. Rotelle, Boniface Ramsey, Edmund Hill, and Maria Boulding, eds. Electronic ed.; (Charlottesville, Va: InteLex Corporation) 2001. http://proxy.library.emory.edu/login?url=http://pm.nlx.com/xtf/view?docId=augustine_iv/augustine_iv.00.xml.

[15] Prov 6:6-8; Matt 6:25-33, Luke 12:22-31.

[16] Martin Luther, "The Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ—Against the Fanatics (1526)" in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings, 3rd Ed.*, Timothy F. Lull & Russell William, eds. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 224-239.

Anthropocentrism not only obscures the revelatory function of the natural world, it also distorts the relationships of human beings to God and the world by seeming to close the divide between human nature and the divine while simultaneously asserting an ontological divide between humanity and other creatures. Anthropocentrism is a foundational assumption of one of the earlier schematics of ontology, the so-called Great Chain of Being.[17] In this representation of reality, being flows from God down through a hierarchy of created material beings: first to human beings, then to other sentient animals, non-sentient animals, plants and other living things, before finally reaching inanimate material bodies.[18] While this image clearly separates God from humanity, it also places human beings much closer to God than to plants or inanimate material bodies. When contemplating the divine above, philosophers and theologians have sought out similarities that might indicate a likeness between humanity and the divine. When contemplating the rest of creation below, they have focused on differences that establish a distinction between human beings and other creatures. In this manner, anthropocentric assumptions distort both the vertical relationship between humanity and the divine and the horizontal relationships between human beings and other material bodies.

On the horizontal plane, this obscures the fact that human beings cannot exist without other creatures, although other creatures seem capable of flourishing without human beings. This can be seen in the veil of ignorance drawn between average consumers and their food in many developed nations. We buy our food pre-packaged in

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[17] Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1936).

[18] I recognize that in its traditional formulation, angels occupy a position between God and humanity within the Great Chain. However, because this work focuses on the status of material creatures, I am intentionally avoiding discussion of immaterial creatures such as angels.

relatively sterile stores under artificial lights. Almost none of the meat in any way resembles the animal it came from. The produce is clean, uniform, and bug-free. This creates the illusion that our food is manufactured, a creation of human innovation, rather than the outcome of the complex lives of other material bodies. The dirt, bugs, and physical variety involved in those lives are removed from the average consumer's perception. How the food we eat comes to the market is hidden, and the costs of our current agricultural practices in animal suffering, waste, erosion, contamination of the ground and water, and the production of greenhouse gasses is not calculated or included in our bills. While it is true that most people "know" that their meat was once a living animal and their grains and vegetables once growing plants, they have little direct experience with these facts.[19] The process by which we obtain our food in the U.S. works strongly against the possibility of human beings recognizing our dependence on the life of other creatures on any level deeper than that of bare cognitive assent. This lack of awareness is entangled with theological devaluation of other creatures. By treating them as commodities, we fail to acknowledge the intrinsic value they possess as beloved creatures of God.

Defining Anthropocentrism

Both the ecological and theological critiques above treat anthropocentrism much like White did, as a monolithic evil. The discerning reader, however, may have noticed that anthropocentrism appears in various forms—sometimes influencing which things garner human attention and sometimes determining how human beings treat other

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[19] Norman Wirzba names this disconnection between human understanding and the interdependent lives of the organisms on which we depend *ecological amnesia,* describing it as the supposition that "our bodies can thrive while other natural bodies languish or die." See "Thanks for the Dirt" in *Diversity and Dominion: Dialogues in Ecology, Ethics, and Theology* (Eugene: WIpf and Stock Publishers, 2010), 71.

creatures as potential objects of ethical or theological concern. In this subsection, we will develop a more nuanced understanding of the different forms of anthropocentrism, and how each might be manifest.

While some have urged replacing Christian anthropocentrism with theocentrism (Gustafson), biocentrism (Moltmann), or mammaliocentrism (Linzey), we need to be clearer about what anthropocentrism entails before we can develop an appropriate response. Towards that end, David Clough has identified five different types of theological anthropocentrism: metaethical, ethical, teleological, epistemological, and perspectival.[20] These types can be separated into two families: objective anthropocentrism, which assumes that value is centered in the human; and subjective anthropocentrism, which focuses on the epistemic and perspectival limitations of human beings. Within these families there are degrees of anthropocentrism, from a chastened form that recognizes commonalities between human beings and other parts of creation while still prioritizing humanity to an anthropomonic form that refuses to consider other parts of creation in ethical, theological, or epistemological matters.

Metaethical, ethical, and teleological anthropocentrism fall into the family of objective anthropocentrism. According to Clough, metaethical anthropocentrism views human beings as the source of all moral value and therefore must be rejected by Christianity because "of its affirmation that God is the source of all value."[21] This rejection affirms that moral value is derived from the divine, not constructed by humanity. Setting aside the metaethical type, the other forms of objective

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[20] David Clough, *On Animals I: Systematic Theology* (New York: Bloomsbury T& T Clark, 2012) xvii-xviii.
[21] Clough, xviii.

anthropocentrism find support in Christian scripture and tradition, at least in their humbler forms. Ethical anthropocentrism in its anthropomonic form claims that only human beings can be objects of ethical concern while the chastened version allows that other creatures can have ethical value while maintaining that human interests are more important than those of other creatures. The anthropomonic form of teleological anthropocentrism assumes that only human beings are included in God's final plan and that other parts of creation therefore exist only for the sake of human beings. This relegates them to the role of a stage or set-pieces in the drama of human salvation. The chastened form of teleological anthropocentrism allows other parts of creation a share in final glory, but argue that such a teleological goal is subordinate to and can only be fulfilled through the salvation of humanity.

Although many scriptural passages deny objective anthropomonism by affirming God's relationship to other-than-human members of creation, other passages support a chastened form of anthropocentrism that continues to prioritize humanity. Scripture asserts that other living beings, inanimate objects such as water and land, and even light and dark, are all parts of the creation that God calls "good" (Gen 1:1-31). Psalm 104 praises creation both in itself and in its usefulness for human welfare. God shows concern for animals when chastising Jonah, "And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, *and also many animals*?" (Jonah 4:11) In Job, God's answer from the whirlwind does not quibble over concepts of human justice. Instead, it offers Job a glimpse into a dizzying multitude of relationships between God and members of creation, particularly members of creation that are not subservient to

human beings (Job 38-41). Jewish law assumes that human beings have ethical obligations to other members of creation, particularly trees (Deut 20:19), and livestock (Deut 25:4). In the New Testament, Jesus claims that birds and field grasses are objects of God's providential care (Matt 6:25-33; see also Luke 12:22-31 and Matt 10:28-31). The epistles relate Christ to all things directly (Col 1:15-20). The Christian understanding of creation posits that God values other parts of creation, and that parts of creation other than human beings have a share in the reconciliation of all things. While these passages deny the anthropomonic form of objective anthropocentrism, some scripture supports chastened objective anthropocentrism. After the flood, human beings are given the right to eat meat, implying that human life has greater value than that of other animals (Gen 9:3). Although Israelites are not allowed to cut down fruit trees, they are permitted to fell those that do not bear fruit, an exception that calls into question whether the prior prohibition implies intrinsic—as opposed to utilitarian—value in trees (Deut 20:20). The Gospels make these anthropocentric implications explicit with Matthew's claim that "You are of more value than many sparrows" (Matt 10:31). This evident biblical basis for objective anthropocentrism raises a question that impacts understandings of the authority of scripture: does this support provide license for Christian adoption of objective anthropocentric worldviews, or does it simply demonstrate the culturally-mediated outworking of unexamined subjective anthropocentrism on the parts of the biblical authors? Before taking up this issue, we need to clarify what subjective anthropocentrism entails.

In contrast to objective anthropocentrism's focus on the comparative theological value of different creatures, subjective anthropocentrism addresses the unavoidable fact

that theology is a human enterprise that falls under certain human constraints. Epistemological anthropocentrism claims that human beings cannot know God in any way other than in terms of how God relates to human beings. If this is taken to refer to the "I-thou" knowledge of personal experience, then it does not go far enough. As an individual human being, I can have that kind of knowledge only as to how God relates to me individually. To claim that this experience might enable me to know how God relates to human beings as such is to universalize my personal experience in an unwarranted fashion. If instead I solicit and accept the testimony of others as to how God relates to them, my knowledge of God would now include something more than how God relates to me. For instance, I would now know that God relates to another person as well as myself, and I might learn that God relates to different people in different ways—something absolutely inaccessible to me through my own experience. Despite the transition from the first-person form of experiential knowledge to another form, this is still considered knowledge about how God interacts with the world. Similarly, human observation of and interaction with other material bodies can provide insight into how God acts in the world. For the most part, Christians have also understood other parts of creation as revelations of God. While the claim of epistemological anthropocentrism can encourage humans to adopt a kind of agnostic humility when it comes to claims about God's relation to creatures other than humans, Clough notes that it "should not prevent us from seeking the knowledge concerning our place before God in relation to other creatures that we need to guide our actions towards them."[22] Such humility is a more theologically productive position than epistemological anthropocentrism because it makes room for the traditional

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[22] Clough, xviii.

view that God is revealed in the "book of nature" while also reminding us of the limitations in our ability to interpret that "text."

Similar to epistemological anthropocentrism's claims, perspectival anthropocentrism holds that human beings can only perceive the world through human senses and that this produces an unavoidably anthropocentric point of view. The logic of this claim parallels explanations of egocentrism: I perceive the world through my eyes and no one else's. However, human beings also have capacities for self-awareness, imagination, empathy, and sociality. These capacities allow us to move beyond our individual perspectives and view the world from the perspectives of others, however imperfectly we might carry out the exercise. While greater dissimilarities between my own perspective and that of another make my adoption of a foreign perspective more difficult, they do not render it impossible. Rather, they require work designed to develop my imaginative and empathetic capabilities. This holds true for engaging other human beings, and for engaging other material bodies as well. While it is likely impossible to fully inhabit the perspective of another, human beings have an innate capacity to empathize which involves approximating foreign perspectives. This capacity can be developed in order to allow human beings to empathize with other-than-human creatures as well.

In sum, *objective anthropocentrism* involves moral judgments about the value and destiny of all parts of creation while *subjective anthropocentrism* claims that the limitations of human perspectives and knowledge are inescapable. While many agree that objective anthropocentrism is problematic and should be resisted—at least in its stronger forms, most also concede that subjective anthropocentrism seems inevitable and dismiss

it from further examination. In the next sub-section, I will argue that because of the relationship between these two types of anthropocentrism, the subjective form must be resisted if we are to prevent objective anthropocentrism from causing the ecological and theological problems already raised.

The Relationship Between Subjective and Objective Anthropocentrism

Subjective anthropocentrism is not directly responsible for utilitarian attitudes towards other-than-human parts of creation. As mentioned above, subjective anthropocentrism at its best is an acknowledgement of human limitations—the recognition that we are neither all-seeing nor all-knowing. We are finite creatures situated within creation, and we therefore experience and interpret the world from our own distinct points of view. This can be acknowledged as a symptom of our finitude and used to support a respect for other members of creation embedded in their own webs of interrelation and looking at the world from their own distinct points of view. Sadly, that is rarely the consequence of affirming subjective anthropocentrism. Like the fox and the grapes, the usual impulse has been to devalue other perspectives by assuming that whatever is valuable must also be accessible to our own species. If humans can only know God as God relates to human beings then many humans assume that God does not relate to other creatures in any meaningful way. If humans can only perceive the world from human perspectives, then many assume that other perspectives cannot have unique insights inaccessible from human perspectives.

While subjective anthropocentrism is *logically* separable from objective anthropocentrism, psychologically it seems inevitably to lead to the devaluation of other parts of creation that defines objective anthropocentrism. The failure of human beings

who are captive to subjective forms of anthropocentrism to recognize the importance and complexity of other material bodies supports teleological anthropocentrism. If human beings do not perceive other material bodies as vital parts of creation, then it is easy to deny them their own *telē* in God's plan. This in turn supports an ethical anthropocentrism that accords non-human mortal, finite, material bodies a lesser moral weight than that of presumed-to-be immortal human recipients of God's grace. Each of these moves distorts human knowledge of and relationship to the other-than-human parts of creation and to God. Anthropocentrism begins with the limitations of human capacities, and instead of working towards developing those capacities, it uses these limitations to dismiss the moral and theological value of other material bodies. Rooted in unexamined habits of mind, it is a particularly insidious form of prejudice against other material bodies, a prejudice that grows stronger the more alien those bodies appear from our own.

This means that while subjective anthropocentrism seems "natural," it raises ethical issues for a social species living in a pluralistic world. As Clough observes, arguments for the inevitability of subjective anthropocentrism are logically indistinguishable from arguments for the inevitability of subjective egocentrism. As a human being, I am not only limited to a generalized "human" way of perceiving and knowing the world. I am also limited to my particular sensory impressions and my particular mind. If that meant that all other perspectives were wholly inaccessible to me, that I could gain knowledge from no other source than my own experience, then language would be a fruitless game and the cooperation necessary for the development of civilizations would have been highly unlikely. Communication requires the ability to

move beyond oneself towards another in order to find, or even construct, common ground.

Fortunately, human beings are among the life-forms have developed both self-awareness and other-regard. We have learned to recognize and respond to other creatures. We have developed empathy. This allows us to approximate the perspective of another, to imagine how they are thinking or feeling. Some are more talented at this than others, but recent studies in neuroscience indicate that this empathic capacity is something that can be developed.[23] Empathic capacity involves Theory of Mind (ToM), which is "the human capacity to comprehend that other people hold beliefs and desires and that these may differ from one's own beliefs and desires."[24] Human capacities for ToM, language, and empathy enable us to overcome subjective egocentrism. They also provide grounds for thinking that we may be able to resist subjective anthropocentrism as well.

There is evidence that ToM can and does expand beyond recognizing that other *people* have their own beliefs and desires to encompass (at least some) beings other than humans. Recognition that other animals have desires of their own—and that some of those desires might be harmful to human health—was necessary for the survival of our species. Understanding animal behavior allowed early human beings to become more adept hunters while escaping predation themselves. This animal version of ToM can be seen in the division between domestic animals and wild animals, in which domestic animals are considered a kind of extension of human interests while wild animals are

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[23] David C. Kidd & Emanuele Castrano, "Reading Literary Fiction Improves Theory of Mind," *Science* (October 18, 2013) 342:6154, at http://science.sciencemag.org/content/342/6156/377, accessed April 16, 2016.
[24] Ibid.

recognized as possessing their own desires independent from what human beings might want from them.[25]

Human beings are capable of recognizing that other creatures have their own desires, that they are not simply extensions of ourselves. Work with animal intelligence indicates that we can also develop insight into how different creatures experience the world and process the information they receive. For example, based on several previous studies of elephant intelligence, researchers assumed that elephants would be able to pass a rudimentary intelligence test that had previously been used with primates. They were offered two sealed buckets, one containing a reward, and the other empty. Researchers discovered that elephants were unable to follow visual clues, such as pointing, to choose the reward.[26] Realizing that elephants do not locate their food by sight, but rather use their well-developed sense of smell, researchers offered them a choice between two buckets—only one of which contained a reward—and allowed them to investigate only one bucket with their trunks. When the elephants were allowed to use their sense of smell, they were able to choose the correct bucket—even by process of elimination when they were only allowed to explore the empty bucket.[27] Josh Plotnik described these tests as having as much to do with human learning processes as with elephant intelligence.

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[25] While it is unlikely that the domesticated cow desires the same things for its life that its human owners do, I bring up the contrast between domesticated and wild animals because it demonstrates that human beings do have a ToM for wild animals. I.e. we recognize that a bear or other large predator might desire our harm.

[26] Plotnik, Joshua M., Jennifer J. Pokorny, Titiporn Keratimanochaya, Christine Webb, Hana F. Beronja, Alice Hennessy, James Hill, et al. "Visual Cues Given by Humans Are Not Sufficient for Asian Elephants (Elephas Maximus) to Find Hidden Food." PLoS ONE 8, no. 4 (April 2013): 1–7. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0061174.

[27] Plotnik, Joshua M., Rachael C. Shaw, Daniel L. Brubaker, Lydia N. Tiller, and Nicola S. Clayton. "Thinking with Their Trunks: Elephants Use Smell but Not Sound to Locate Food and Exclude Nonrewarding Alternatives." *Animal Behaviour* 88 (February 2014): 91–98. doi:10.1016/j.anbehav.2013.11.011.

Researchers first had to engage in close observation, critical thinking, and empathy in order to construct tests that accounted for perspectival differences between pachyderms and human beings. Only then could their results be meaningfully interpreted.[28] This process demonstrates that human beings are capable of imaginatively adopting the perspective of an other-than-human creature in order to gain new insight. We *can* intentionally set aside our own ways of processing the world for a time in order to enter into alternative ways of processing.

Does this mean that subjective anthropocentrism is an avoidable failure of moral vision? Any answer to that requires a finer description of the grades of anthropocentrism involved. Subjective anthropocentrism can range from a refusal to empathetically engage any nonhuman creatures (strong subjective anthropocentrism) to the humble acknowledgement that human epistemological limitations mean we can never be sure what is going on inside another creature's mind (weak subjective anthropocentrism). This weak subjective anthropocentrism seems to be unavoidable. It is also an expression of humility, and calls for resisting strong forms of subjective anthropocentrism by engaging other creatures empathetically. Ultimately, weak subjective anthropocentrism acknowledges that we have no direct insight into other human beings either—but this is no excuse for a failure to engage empathetically with the neighbors that we meet. Weak subjective anthropocentrism acknowledges certain human limitations and challenges human beings to overcome those limitations so far as this is possible. While the default way for human beings to perceive and process the world will still be through the eyes of

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[28] Josh Plotnik, "A Primate's Festschrift: Pant Grunts, Elephant Noses, and Frans," at *The Social Mind: A Festschrift Honoring the Career of Frans de Waal*, September 19, 2014. Available at http://www.sarah-brosnan.com/the-social-mind/

human beings, we can resist the slide from subjective anthropocentrism into objective anthropocentrism by critiquing and resisting subjective anthropocentrism's limited vision, particularly when it comes to making ethical decisions about our interactions with other material bodies.

Methodology

In order to correct the prejudicial habits of mind that subjective anthropocentrism fosters, it is necessary to take other material bodies seriously as objects of both ethical and theological worth. Because anthropocentric considerations have dominated ethical and theological reflection so thoroughly, it is difficult to take other material bodies seriously while still entertaining anthropocentric concerns. Therefore, an attempt to decenter humanity from the theological project will require bracketing out purely anthropocentric concerns in order to give sustained attention to other parts of creation.[29] This setting aside of anthropocentric concerns does not mean that such concerns are not important. Because human beings are also beloved creatures of God, these concerns are as important as those of any other creature. Rather this bracketing-out is a recognition that human concerns have set the theological agenda for as long as human beings have been doing theology, drowning out consideration of other creatures as appropriate loci for theological reflection.

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[29] This approach is in contrast to other ecotheological projects that attempt to overcome biased thinking by expanding the circle of moral concern to include all sentient creatures, all animals, or all living beings as objects of theological concern. While such projects are valid attempts to combat anthropocentric biases, they fail, and do not recognize that they fail, because they never remove human beings from the center of their circles of moral and theological concern. It does not matter how large the circle is expanded, if it remains centered on the human then it remains anthropocentric. This means that the debate about anthropocentrism vs. biocentrism vs. ecocentrism is a debate about the border of the circle, not its center. These expanding circles can render anthropocentrism less harmful to other members of creation, but they do not directly challenge the anthropocentric milieu that they inhabit.

This humble quieting of one's own agenda echoes Jesus' caution against egocentric pride in his teaching at a dinner party in Luke 14:7-11. Dining with a leader of the Pharisees, Jesus observed the guests choosing places of honor. Jesus cautions them not to take the place of honor, but rather to take the lowest place. His explanation of this instruction draws on the egocentric hopes and fears of an honor-based society. If you take the place of honor but the host has invited someone more important to the banquet, then you will be publicly shamed when asked to give up your seat and take the lowest one. On the other hand, if you take the lowest seat then your host might insist that you move to a higher seat, an honor that will impress all of those at the table. This passage both undermines and bolsters egocentric motivations for behavior—urging those listening to adopt humble behavior by offering future honor, or at least the avoidance of shame, as a reward. It appears that this passage supports false humility. However, the behavior urged is not simply an attempt to gather honor. Jesus tells the audience "do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited *by your host*" (Luke 14:8). Rather than urging false humility, this passage indicates that Christians are dependent upon another for determination of honor (or value)—the host. Further, it offers advice on how to behave in the uncertainty created by this dependence. Do not assume that you are the guest of honor—leave that for the host to decide.

This reading of the banquet scene offers some clues as to my approach in this work. As Clough argued, Christian theology holds that God is the source of all moral value. While human beings have long assumed that we are the most valuable guests at the banquet of creation, that determination is not ours to make. Instead of boorishly taking the place of honor by assuming that human beings are the goal of creation, we have the

opportunity to take the lowest place by setting aside our particularly human fears and concerns in order to pay attention to others. Doing so does not deny the importance of human fears and concerns—as creatures of God human beings may be as important as any other creature. Rather, choosing the lowest place reflects a humble agnosticism about how God values different parts of creation. Such a move critiques the assumption that God's valuation reflects the values assigned by human beings—that the way we perceive the world must be the way that God does. It opens space for us to explore new ways of perceiving the world in solidarity with other-than-human inhabitants of it.

Excluding particularly anthropocentric concerns from consideration for the majority of this work serves two purposes. First, it quiets the noise of human concerns that has practically drowned out the possibility of hearing any other voices for millennia. Second, this quiet allows us to finally perceive a host of other concerns trying to be spoken, concerns that have been neglected for far too long. It encourages us to pay attention to other creatures—how they live and how they relate to God.[30]

Although I will develop the details of my approach in Chapter 2, I can offer the foundational assumptions now. In order to clearly perceive and critique anthropocentric bias human beings must step out of the center of the circle of concern and allow another being to step in at that focal point. Such an exercise creates anxiety and resistance—as can be seen in protests against the "absurdity" of trying to account theologically for creatures as anthropocentrically insignificant as gnats—which indicate that it is finally

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[30] Sallie McFague calls this practice *attention epistemology*, describing it as "listening, paying attention to another, the other, in itself, for itself" in *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993) 49.

touching those biases that so often escape inspection.[31] This relinquishing of position

does not require ordering the entire universe of value around another creature. It means

recognizing that the universe is related to every being that makes it up. By viewing the

circles of concern constructed in many ways with many different creatures positioned in

the center, we can come to see that every part of creation has an integrity of its own and

that this integrity serves as the basis for its relations to every other part of creation.

Nothing is merely a utilitarian resource for something else—everything exists for itself as

well as for others.

      If we are able to shed our anthropocentric lenses, at least for a time, then we may

learn to see the world more clearly. We may learn how to respond to ecological

devastation before we render this planet uninhabitable for mammals like ourselves. We

might better understand our relationships to God and to one another. Mary Evelyn Tucker

and John Grim argue that changing worldviews is the key to changing ecological

behavior: "the attitudes and values that shape people's concepts of nature come primarily

from religious worldviews and ethical practices…the moral imperative and value systems

of religions are indispensable in mobilizing the sensibilities of people toward preserving

the environment."[32] If they are correct, then we stand in need of an alternative to our

current anthropocentric worldview. One of the goals of this project is to provide tools for

constructing just such a worldview.

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[31] This anxiety and resistance can be seen in ecotheologians' own avoidance of claims that seem "absurd" to them—see Grace Jantzen's dismissal of gnats in *God's World, God's Body* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984).

[32] Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, "Overview of World Religions and Ecology," (2009) http://fore.yale.edu/religion/ accessed November 1, 2017.

The Doctrine of the Incarnation

Rather than attempting to construct an alternative worldview from scratch, this project focuses on reconstructing one piece of one religious worldview: the Christian doctrine of the incarnation. I have chosen this doctrine for two reasons. The first is that although the doctrine has been criticized by numerous theologians in modern times, it continues to be a key feature of Christianity today. Every week, millions of Christians continue to affirm that Jesus Christ is, in the words of the Nicene Creed, "the only Son of God, begotten from the Father…God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made; of the same essence as the Father." The continued centrality of this doctrine to Christian piety leads to the second reason I have chosen to focus this work on the incarnation. Perhaps more than any other religious claim, the claims that God became a human being, and that this changed the world, both shape and are shaped by anthropocentric assumptions.

One of these assumptions is that human beings possess a greater amount of dignity than do other creatures. This elevated dignity is necessary to make it fitting for the Word to become human, rather than some other sort of creature. This dignity is frequently associated with some characteristic assumed to be particular to human beings alone. Reason, and the freedom of deliberate choice that it encompasses, is the characteristic that most anthropocentric arguments point to as the explanation of God's decision to become human—it is a characteristic that the human mind is said to share with the divine. It is also a characteristic that human beings assume we do not share with other material creatures. This uniqueness makes it valuable because it sets human beings

apart from the rest of creation.[33] So theologians argue that it was fitting for the Word to become flesh as a human being because of a uniquely human characteristic while also understanding the incarnation as an affirmation of anthropocentric values. The fact that God became incarnate as a human being is assumed to mean that human beings are closer to God than other parts of creation.[34] Thus, explanations of the fitness of the incarnation both arise from and reinforce anthropocentric assumptions.

Additionally, the way that Christ's work is understood shapes and is shaped by anthropocentric assumptions. Soteriological constructions that understand the purpose of the incarnation as human need—particularly along the lines of Aquinas' claim that if human beings had not sinned, the Word would not have become incarnate—indicate that human beings are so important that God will take on finitude, humility, suffering, and death for our sakes.[35] On the one hand, this is a grand affirmation of the nature of God, of the One whose power is in weakness and whose glory is in humiliation. On the other hand, it is a claim that human beings are important enough to warrant this sacrifice through our misdeeds. The hidden anthropocentrism of this theological construction casts a visible shadow that once again affirms the importance of human beings while ostensibly focusing on God and God's nature. Christological constructions both fund and are funded by anthropocentric assumptions. The interrelations between Christian expressions of anthropocentrism and christological claims means that any attempt to clarify christology will need to grapple with anthropocentrism, and any attempt to

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[33] This is in no way a uniquely Christian idea, but it is one that was adopted by Christianity.

[34] This reasoning diminishes the logic of kenoticism and humility, which understands that the incarnation is the ultimate condescension. In order for this condescension to be truly emptying, the God would become incarnate as the most lowly—not the highest—of creatures. This argument will be developed in more depth in Chapter 6.

[35] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologicae*, III.1.3.

undermine anthropocentrism in Christianity will have to engage in a critical retrieval of christology.

Other theologians have recognized the enmeshment of anthropocentrism and incarnation, and begun developing reconstructions that undermine the connections between the doctrine and more pronounced forms of anthropomonism. For example, Niels Henrik Gregersen has proposed and developed a way of understanding the incarnation as reaching not just to the depth of human existence, but "into the very tissue of biological existence, and system of nature."[36] Gregersen calls this approach "deep incarnation." In 2011, the John Templeton Foundation sponsored a symposium on the question, "Is God incarnate in all that is?" This symposium led to an edited volume wrestling with the relationship of the incarnation to creatures that are not human: *Incarnation: On the Scope and Depth of Christology* (2015).[37] The present work uses developments of deep incarnation as foundational assumptions, as will be discussed in Chapter 1. It differs from most of the work on deep incarnation, however, by placing those assumptions in conversation with conciliar formulations of two-natures christology.[38]

This work wagers that a non-anthropocentric interpretation of the incarnation can decenter the focus of christology from the importance of the humanity of Jesus and instead emphasize the union of the Creator to the created in the person of Jesus Christ in

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[36] Niels Henrik Gregersen, "The Cross of Christ in an Evolutionary World," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 40 (2001): 205. See also Gregersen, "Deep Incarnation: Why Evolutionary Continuity Matters in Christology," *Toronto Journal of Theology* 26 no 2 (Fall 2010) 173-188; and "Deep Incarnation and Kenosis: in, with, under, and as: a response to Ted Peters," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 52 (2013): 251-262.

[37] Niels Henrik Gregersen, Ed., *Incarnation: On the Scope and Depth of Christology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015) ix.

[38] This present work develops in greater depth an argument advanced by Margaret Kirkpatrick in "'For God So Loved the World': An Incarnational Ecology," *Anglican Theological Review* 91 no 2 (2009) 191-212.

a way that is universally significant for all of creation. In Chapter 1, I will argue that certain challenges to conciliar christology are not direct critiques of the doctrine of the incarnation itself, but rather critiques of anthropocentric developments of the doctrine. In Chapter 2, I will offer ecomimetic interpretation as a method for resisting anthropocentrism by centering theological reflection on creatures that are other-than-human. This re-centering will raise new theological questions, and attempts to answer these questions will help build human capacities for empathetic imagination on an ecological scale. The development of this capacity is necessary for resisting subjective anthropocentrism and the unacceptable turn towards objective anthropocentrism that it promotes.

In Chapter 3, I will bring conciliar christology, Greek philosophy, and modern biology into conversation around the concept of *ousia* in order to see what theological significance it retains in a world of theological and ecological upheaval. I will argue that the ecumenical councils make room for understanding all of existence in terms of only two *ousiai*: that of the Creator and that of the created. This distinction undermines objective anthropocentrism by both emphasizing the metaphysical commonalities of all created beings and maintaining the infinite qualitative distinction between human beings and God. Chapter 4 applies ecomimetic interpretation to the questions of what makes up the common *ousia* of all created things and what divine attributes might be emphasized when God is contemplated from perspectives that are other than human. This will generate a revised understanding of what is essential to creaturely being and what is affirmed about the divine, an understanding that provides a different perspective on debates over the coherence of the incarnation raised in Chapter 1. In Chapter 5, I apply

the insights gained from the ecomimetic exploration of the previous chapter to understanding the work of the incarnation from a non-anthropocentric perspective. This leads to an understanding of the incarnation as universally and immediately effective for all parts of creation, while leaving room for its effects to be experienced differently by different creatures. In the final chapter, I will reintroduce the primarily human concerns of ethics and responsibility in order to explore what impact this reconstructed theological understanding has on ethical engagement with the world.

While no single tool, theory, or reconstruction will be able to solve the ecological and theological problems that we are facing in the first half of the 21st century, I offer the tools of ecomimetic interpretation and this reconstruction of the doctrine of the incarnation to do their small part in the collective effort that Thomas Berry called the Great Work of our time.

1

Christological Challenges

The incarnation has always been a scandal in Christianity, although the nature of that scandal has changed through the ages. For Paul's audience, the "stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles" was the scandal of a crucified messiah, for the Jewish law stated that "anyone hung on a tree is under God's curse."[1] As the early church struggled to synthesize their claims about Jesus Christ with contemporary Greco-Roman intellectual culture, the scandal focused on the changing and suffering of Jesus as incompatible with standard philosophical presuppositions that the divine was both immutable and impassible. With the European Enlightenment, the focus of the scandal shifted to the relationship of historical to eternal truth, as seen in Gotthold Lessing's famous claim: "*contingent truths of history can never become the proof of necessary truths of reason…*That, then, is the ugly great ditch which I cannot cross, however often and however earnestly I have tried to make this leap."[2] In the 21st century, the scandal focuses on the particularity of the incarnation in an era of religious pluralism. John Cobb notes that "Many thoughtful believers are clear that they do not want to continue to make assertions about Jesus Christ that are anti-Jewish or sexist…Many want to avoid, in general, language that appears to belittle the faith of people in other religious communities."[3]

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[1] 1 Cor 1:23, Deut 21:23. See also Gal 3:13

[2] Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, "On the proof of the spirit and of power," in *Lessing: Philosophical and Theological Writings* trans. and ed. by H. B. Nisbet, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 85 & 87.

[3] John Cobb, "Forward," in *Fidelity with Plausibility: Modest Christologies in the Twentieth Century*, Wesley J. Wildman (New York: State University of New York Press, 1998), xi.

Beyond these "scandals," the incarnation also raises challenges that its claims are simply incoherent. Indeed, the claim that Jesus Christ is both the historical human being Jesus of Nazareth and the divine Lord and Savior of the world has raised coherence questions since the beginning of the Christian movement. The early church's attempts to work out how this double claim was consistent with the insistence that Christians still worshipped the God of Judaism led to the Nicene understanding of God as triune: one substance (*ousia*) in three persons (*hypostases*). However, this Trinitarian definition did not settle controversies over how the second of those persons could be both God and a human being. Early theologians rejected two extreme explanations: one, associated with Docetists, which posited that Jesus feigned humanity in order to reach human beings, but always remained impassibly divine; and another, associated with Ebionites, which held that Jesus was an inspired human being but not truly divine. The christological controversies of the 4th and 5th centuries were carried out somewhere between these two positions. Was Jesus composed of a divine mind or will occupying a human body? Was he a hybrid, a *tertium quid* made by combining both divine and human substances? How was the church to reconcile Gospel passages that assigned Jesus divine knowledge or power (knowing what was in peoples' hearts, walking on water, stilling storms, and multiplying loaves) with those that indicated his human finitude (not knowing the day or the hour of the end times, weeping beside Lazarus's grave, admonishing that only the Father is good)?[4]

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[4] See John 2:24-25; Matt 14:22-33, Mark 6:45-51, John 6:16-21; Matt 8:23-27, Mark 4:35-41, Luke 8:22-25. Cf. Matt 24:36, Mark 13:32; John 11:35; Matt 19:17, Mark 10:18, Luke 18:19.

The Chalcedonian christological definition of 451 set the boundaries for future christological debates for most of the world's churches,[5] asserting that:

> We all with one voice teach the confession of one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ: the same perfect in divinity and perfect in humanity, the same truly God and truly man, of a rational soul and a body; consubstantial with the Father as regards his divinity, and the same consubstantial with us as regards his humanity; like us in all respects except for sin; begotten before the ages from the Father as regards his divinity, and in the last days the same for us and for our salvation from Mary, the virgin God-bearer, as regards his humanity; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, only-begotten, acknowledged in two natures which undergo no confusion, no change, no division, no separation; at no point was the difference between the natures taken away through the union, but rather the property of both natures is preserved and comes together into a single person and a single subsistent being; he is not parted or divided into two persons, but is one and the same only-begotten Son, God, Word, Lord Jesus Christ, just as the prophets taught from the beginning about him, and as the Lord Jesus Christ himself instructed us, and as the creed of the fathers handed it down to us.[6]

Over the course of Christian history, this position has been questioned on grounds of both coherence and plausibility. *Coherence challenges* question Chalcedon's two-natures formulation by holding that it is contradictory to ascribe both the divine attributes and the characteristics of a human being to one and the same person. *Plausibility challenges* question whether the claim that a particular human being living in a particular time and place is the Lord of the world can be believed. Since the beginning of the modern environmental movement, a third concern has loomed beyond these two challenges—the question of whether the humanity of Jesus places a seal of divine approval on objectively anthropocentric tendencies to consider human beings the only creatures of legitimate ethical and theological concern.

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[5] Although non-Chalcedonian churches have always existed, this work focuses on two-natures Christologies of the Chalcedonian tradition, which includes the various Eastern (v. Oriental) Orthodox churches, as well as the Latin churches (Catholic and magisterial Protestant) of western Europe.

[6] Norman P. Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils: Volume I (Nicaea I-Lateran V)* (London and Washington, D.C.: Sheed & Ward Limited and Georgetown University Press, 1990) 86-87

Although environmentally sensitive theologians tend to view the incarnation as one of the more ecologically beneficial Christian doctrines—God becoming human affirms materiality in a way that contradicts the escapist dualism that often characterizes popular piety—the doctrine has also been used to support understandings of human exceptionalism that marginalize other members of creation. In this chapter I will argue that both coherence and plausibility challenges to conciliar christology have their roots in the implicit anthropocentric biases that have shaped traditional interpretations of the incarnation. Then I will examine how ecotheology's turn towards the "Cosmic Christ" and recent work with "deep incarnation" begins to address these biases and respond to ecological critiques by expanding the soteriological playing field. This sets the stage for the remainder of this work, which will reinterpret conciliar christology, retaining classic formulations while intentionally resisting the anthropocentric distortions that make christology susceptible to challenges either alleging its incoherence or denying its plausibility.

Coherence Challenges

The first class of challenges to the doctrine of the incarnation is based on classical understandings of what attributes are necessary aspects of the divine and what characteristics are essential to humanity. Coherence challenges rest on the complementarity of divine and human attributes. Before engaging in his own defense of conciliar christology, Timothy Pawl explains this, the "fundamental problem" of two-natures christology:

> Anything with two natures, one divine, and one human, will have some predicates aptly said of it in virtue of one of those natures, but others apt of it in virtue of the other nature. Some of these predicates will be inconsistent with one another. And so anything with both a divine and a human nature will have inconsistent

predicates true of it. No one thing, however, can have inconsistent predicates true of it. Consequently, nothing can have both a divine and a human nature. Thus, Conciliar Christology, since it entails that Christ has both a divine and human nature, is false.[7]

Using generic ideas for the moment, the force of the logic is that if being divine entails having attribute [X], and being human requires the possession of the attribute [not X], then it is incoherent to claim that any one being can be both divine and human at the same time.[8] These challenges arise on two related fronts: first there is the question of whether Jesus could be truly divine, i.e. did he possess all the characteristics that are essential to divine nature, and then there is the question of whether he was truly human, possessing all the characteristics essential to human nature.

Because the literature on these objections is extensive and the arguments quite varied, I need to clearly define the scope of my engagement with this debate. In this work I do not intend to examine all of the attempts that have been made to "solve" the problem in the literature.[9] Nor do I intend to defend all statements of conciliar Christianity from all attacks. I believe that the councils, like all theologians, were doing their best to articulate that which is ultimately ineffable. Because they are speaking where language fails, their statements are sometimes helpful while at other times they are much less so. For this project, there is no need to assume or prove that they were correct in all of their claims. Nor do I intend to prove or disprove an exhaustive list of divine attributes. Instead, I will argue that the problem of incoherence and the christological challenges based on it are distorted by two different strains of human exceptionalism. The first is a

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[7] Timothy Pawl, *In Defense of Conciliar Christology: A Philosophical Essay* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 75.

[8] Thomas V. Morris, *The Logic of God Incarnate* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1986) 20.

[9] For a recent survey of these attempts, see Pawl, *In Defense of Conciliar Christology*.

metaphysical exceptionalism that assumes that the divine attributes bear a particular relationship to the essential characteristics of human nature. The second is an epistemological exceptionalism, a form of linguistic hubris, that assumes that human language involves precisely understood terms that have fixed definitions. Rather than attempting to offer *the* novel argument that solves the problem of inconsistent predicates within the same analytical framework that gave rise to the problem, I argue that christological claims need a new framework that resists anthropocentric distortions while remaining focused on the soteriological concerns that motivated these conciliar claims. In this section, I will first examine how anthropocentric assumptions about what characteristics are "great-making" have distorted classical collections of divine attributes, and then examine three methods used to reconcile apparently incompatible attributes—by denying that an attribute is essential to the nature it is associated with, denying that a divine attribute is "great-making" and aptly predicated of the divine, and refining the definition of the attribute in such a way that it no longer creates logical difficulties. I will argue that traditional understandings of analogical predication support this third method, and that criticisms of these defenses are distorted by anthropocentric assumptions about the capacities of human language.

The Current Debate

In order to raise a challenge to the logical coherence of the incarnation, one must first have some idea of the characteristics necessary for an entity to be divine and the characteristics one must possess in order to be human. This raises the question of whence these *a priori* conceptions of divinity and humanity arise. The most basic answer is that they come from human philosophers and theologians, who have mused on the nature of

the divine and of humanity since long before the birth of Jesus. Thomas Morris notes that there is a divide between those who follow "the *a priorist*, Anselmian tradition, which begins with a purportedly self-evident conception of God as the greatest possible being" and those who instead "are committed to an *a posteriori*, empirical, or experiential mode of developing our idea of God."[10] In other words, the *a priorist* begins with definitions of divinity and humanity and then examines the logical coherence of the incarnation, while the *a posteriorist* begins with religious experience that affirms the reality of the incarnation and uses that to form understandings of divinity and humanity. As Morris proposes, there is a middle ground which holds the two approaches in tension, allowing them to mutually correct one another.[11] Nevertheless, those who wade into debates over the coherence of christological claims do so with particular lists of seemingly incompatible predicates that must be true for a being to be divine or to be human. In this sub-section, we will examine the lists of attributes that lead to these challenges, as well as some attempts to reconcile the apparent paradox of the incarnation.

Fully God

First we will examine the *a priori* conceptions of what must be true about a being in order to consider it fully divine. John Hick notes that traditional attributes of the divine include "being the eternal, omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent and self-existent creator of everything that exists."[12] Morris affirms these attributes and adds impeccability, impassibility, immutability, and being necessarily good to the list of characteristics

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[10] Morris, 74.
[11] Morris, 88. This position would grant the *a priori* claims a presumption of truth, while also recognizing that evidence from religious experience and revelation can (and in some cases, does) overcome that presumption.
[12] John Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate: Christology in a Pluralistic Age* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 73.

traditionally ascribed to God.[13] As Morris explains, these characteristics are necessarily true of an "Anselmian" conception of God. In the *Proslogion* Anselm describes the God of Christian faith as "something than which nothing greater can be thought."[14] From this he deduces that God is "whatever it is better to be than not to be," including self-existent, creator of all things, just, truthful, happy, percipient, omnipotent, merciful, impassible, living, wise, good, eternal, and unbounded.[15] This list is not simply an apophatic denial of limitations to the divine, but the positive attribution of certain characteristics to God, characteristics that Morris refers to as "great-making properties."[16] Under this line of reasoning, the divine attributes are all of those characteristics that it is better to possess than not to possess, and that can be possessed together. The greatness of these attributes is assumed to be self-evident: obviously it is greater to be impassible than to be passible, greater to be living than to be non-living, and greater to be unbounded than to be bounded. Anselm was not unique in his assumptions about the divine. Although Thomas Aquinas justified the divine attributes differently (by arguing that they are necessarily implied by the claim that God is the first principle or cause of all things), his collection of infinity, omnipresence, omniscience, immutability, eternity, and omnipotence as the divine attributes also abides by Anselm's logic that God is whatever it is better to be than not to be.[17]

The problem with this argument is that any list of great-making attributes reflects a wish-list of the characteristics that the person making the list values. Those constructing

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[13] Morris, 19 & 84.

[14] Anselm, "Proslogion" in *Basic Writings*, ed. and trans. by Thomas Williams (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2007) 81.

[15] Anselm, 83-84, & 88.

[16] Morris, 76.

[17] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I.1.3, I.4, I.7-10, I.11.25, I.25.

such lists assume that it is universally recognized that these characteristics are better to possess than not to possess. If you do not realize that it is better to be immutable than to be mutable, there is something deficient in your reasoning. In 2013, marketers for AT&T U-verse cashed in on the emotional force of such reasoning with their ad campaign featuring the tag-line, "It's not complicated." In these ads, an adult asked a group of children simply-formed value judgment questions, like "What is better, faster or slower?" and other questions about being bigger, and having more.[18] In unison, the children opted for the "great-making characteristic"—faster, bigger, more. Since even children know which is better, these commercials imply, you would have to be a bit simple to question these values. The problem with both the commercials and the Anselmian divine attributes is that what makes having a characteristic greater than not having it is contextual. While faster, bigger, and more coverage are valuable characteristics for a wireless network, they are not universally great. Great barbecue requires slow cooking, nanotechnology reflects the value of the small, and more salt does not always help the flavor of a meal or the health of those eating it. Whether it is better to be immutable or changing depends upon the perspective of the individual, and no human being has the perspective of the divine. Lists of divine attributes reflect the values of those making such lists. Since the *a priori* divine attributes were developed by human beings who were usually empowered human men, they reflect anthropocentric, and in many cases androcentric, preferences.

For example, the Anselmian attribution of immutability and omnipotence to the divine was influenced by the fact that human beings are subject to change caused by

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[18] I have previously written on this line of commercials, entitled, "It's not complicated" March, 2013, at https://scholarblogs.emory.edu/placingamericanreligions/author/rlcopel/. For the commercial see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fG3_kC5Gxv0 (accessed 6/8/2016).

forces beyond our control. For a variety of reasons, philosophers and theologians have historically tended to write from a perspective of privilege, and from this perspective, change usually entails diminishment. Those who view change in this way would view imperviousness to change as an attribute that it is better to possess than not to possess. Similarly, privileged people characteristically attach a high value to power, defined in an active way as the ability to bring about whatever state of affairs one wishes to bring about. In contrast, there are great numbers of people who live under oppression and who therefore view change and power in a different light. Their oppression stems from the disproportionate exercise of power by others, an exercise which impairs their own powers of self-determination. From this perspective, defining omnipotence as the determination of everything that happens ties it too closely to the foundation of their oppression. For those suffering oppression, change is necessary to open the way for liberation and growth. Oppressors and beneficiaries of oppression generally want the *status quo* to remain indefinitely and therefore value immutability highly, while the oppressed want the current state of affairs overturned and thus value the changeability necessary for acts of creative liberation. Understandings of the divine advanced by those marginalized by society have different emphases than those supported by the dominant tradition.

These differences become more pronounced when parts of creation other than human beings are taken into consideration. For example, change seems to be the foundation of existence for the variety of material bodies that make up the created order. The story of the universe is a story of change that stems from mutual interactions, from the sharing of electrons to the shaping of continents and the conception of new life. Although some change occurs so slowly that human beings have historically overlooked

it (e.g., the drifting of continents), a perspective that takes into account billions of years can find no instances of immutability in the material world. No material body persists as itself eternally, each is shaped and re-shaped by the other material bodies with which it comes into contact. Change seems to be fundamental to material existence, and necessary for the emergence and continuation of life. From a non-anthropocentric perspective, labeling immutability a great-making attribute would seem to be a rebuke of the very structure of material reality.[19]

As previously stated, it is not within the scope of this work to investigate the virtues of each of the attributes traditionally ascribed to the divine. Instead, we will examine how some of these attributes ground challenges to christological coherence in order to tease out the anthropocentric distortions inherent in those challenges. But in order to understand those challenges we must first examine the characteristics considered necessary to being fully human as well.

Fully Human

While many parties to this debate will concede that there is some difficulty with *a priori* definitions of what it means to be divine, most seem to assume that the definition of a human being is more easily reached. The ecumenical councils agreed that to be fully human one had to possess both a body and a rational soul, but said little about what characteristics human beings possessed. When they specify that Jesus suffered, they do not necessarily name "suffering" as an essential characteristic of human nature. Rather they specify what the Word underwent in the incarnation. Those engaging in debates over the coherence of the incarnation are not clear about the sources from which they derive

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[19] This is not to say that the divine attributes must resemble the created order, but rather to demonstrate that whether a given character is great-making is not as readily apparent as many have assumed.

their lists of human attributes, but they do seem to presume that such lists are universally accepted. Pawl offers a list of human predicates that are the complementary to the divine predicates. According to this list, a human being is visible, comprehensible, limited, passible, expressible in writing, localized to a place, and mutable.[20] Morris' list of human characteristics includes many of the same descriptions, with the additions of being contingent, peccable, and non-omniscient.[21] While these characteristics do seem applicable to human beings as we have encountered them up to this point, it is questionable whether they are all essential to being human. If a human being were to be invisible, would it cease to be human? Are those who have hereditary sensory and autonomic neuropathy, some forms of which prevent the perception of pain and thus prevent physical suffering, something other than fully human?

The question of what makes human beings specifically human is far from settled. Current work in the fields of genetic engineering, reproductive technology, and biotechnology indicates that we may one day develop the ability to alter both the genetic and phenotypic characteristics of individual human beings.[22] If some future humanoid creations have different capacities than human beings have had in the past, would this render them inhuman? Such questions about the definition of human nature arise more frequently in the realm of bioethics than that of theology, *per se*. However, the concept that there is something essential about human beings that sets us apart from other animals has been foundational to Western science, philosophy, and ethics. It has shaped our

[20] Pawl, 91.
[21] Morris, 19.
[22] See Stuart A. Newman's discussion of human developmental biology, clones, and chimeras in "Renatured Biology: Getting Past Postmodernism in the Life Sciences," and Gerald McKenny's examination of natural kinds in "Nature as Given, Nature as Guide, Nature as Natural Kinds: Return to Nature in the Ethics of Human Biotechnology," in *Without Nature? A New Condition for Theology* ed. by David Albertson and Cabell King (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010) 116-123 and 171-176.

understandings of human rights and why human beings owe greater moral obligations to other human beings than to members of different "natural kinds." Such essentialism has traditionally been connected to our intellectual and cognitive capacities, rather than our physical ones.[23] But recent work in the moral and cognitive capacities of other animals calls even this version of human exceptionalism into question.[24]

Those who made these lists of essential human attributes may have recognized the danger of making the lists too particular—the possibility of excluding some human beings from their proper natural kind. The majority of the characteristics they included are quite general, properties commonly held by all material beings. For instance, the characteristics of visibility, comprehensibility, limitation, placed-ness, contingency, and non-omniscience are common to all material bodies. The characteristics of mortality and passibility are shared with all living beings. Only peccability, the capacity to sin, can arguably be limited to human beings alone among material beings, although those who allow that other beings also possess some form of freedom might include peccability among the characteristics of those beings as well.[25]

The fact that the characteristics deemed essential to human nature are actually characteristics that we share with a number of other created beings indicates that the coherence debates are not so concerned with defining human nature as they are with

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[23] The possession of a body has distinguished human beings from angels, the other rational created beings inhabiting the Christian conception of reality. But it is the possession of a rational soul that has been used to distinguish human beings from every other material body.

[24] See Frans de Waal's work on evolution, moral emotions, and animal intelligence in *Good Natured: The Origins of Right and Wrong in Humans and Other Animals* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996); *The Bonobo and the Atheist: In Search of Humanism Among the Primates* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2013); and *Are We Smart Enough to Know How Smart Animals Are?* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2016).

[25] Particularly human characteristics seem to enter into the debates only at the point of determining whether Jesus was capable of sinning, based on the preconceived understanding of the divine as necessarily good. See Morris, 108-162.

determining whether the claim that Jesus was divine can be reconciled with the concrete features of his particular life. Pawl acknowledges this when he argues that denying the essentiality of certain incompatible human predicates cannot render conciliar christology coherent *because the councils themselves allege incompatible predicates of Christ*. For example, in his "Letter to Flavian" (which the Council of Chalcedon specifically "accepted"), Leo says of Christ that, "invulnerable nature was united to a nature that could suffer; so that in a way that corresponded to the remedies we needed, one and the same *mediator between God and humanity, the man Christ Jesus*, could both on the one hand die and on the other be incapable of death."[26] Therefore, an orthodox theologian (or at least a conciliar one) cannot avoid the incompatibility challenge by denying that being able to die is part of human nature or being incapable of death is appropriately said of the divine nature because the ecumenical councils claim that both are applicable to Christ.

Arguments for Coherence

As just alluded to, one approach to the apparent incompatibility of divine and human characteristics has been to deny that certain human characteristics, like contingency or sinfulness, are essential to human nature. Morris explains this approach by differentiating between "individual nature" and "kind nature," and then further distinguishing common characteristics from essential ones. First, in response to Leigh's one-nature understanding of the incarnation, Morris points to the difference between an "individual nature" and a "kind nature." According to this distinction, an individual nature is "the whole set of properties individually necessary and jointly sufficient for being numerically identical with *that individual*."[27] On the other hand, a kind nature or

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[26] Tanner, 78.
[27] Morris, 38.

natural kind is the "set of properties individually necessary and jointly sufficient for membership in that kind."[28] This distinction makes room for individuating characteristics, or hypostatic properties, that do not affect the metaphysical nature of the being in question. For example, I am a 5'4" tall, blue-eyed female. These may be properties necessary for me being who I am, but they are not necessary for my being human.

Morris' second distinction is between those characteristics that are commonly held by all members of a natural kind and those that are necessary to membership in that kind. He demonstrates this distinction by positing that while all human beings up to this time share the property of having lived on the earth, it is entirely conceivable that in the future human beings will be born, live, and die without ever having set foot on the earth—either in space stations or in colonies established on other planets or moons. However, it is unlikely that anyone would deny that these human beings possessed a human nature simply because they did what no one had ever done before.[29] Based on these distinctions, characteristics that are essential to natural kinds are those characteristics which are shared by all members of those kinds, and the lack of which would be a bar to being a member of that natural kind.

Theologically, Morris deploys the second distinction to argue that certain limiting characteristics may be common to merely human beings, but that they are not kind-essential to being a human being. As he explains,

> Surely, a merely human being will not have existed from eternity as divine. A mere human will furthermore be a contingent creation. But no orthodox theologian has ever claimed that Jesus was merely human. The claim is that he was fully human, but also divine. If contingency, coming into existence, and possibly ceasing to exist were essential human properties, the doctrine of the Incarnation would express a metaphysical, or broadly logical, impossibility. But I

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[28] Morris, 39.
[29] Morris, 63.

can think of no compelling argument, or any other type of good reason, to think they are elements of human nature, understood along our precise metaphysical lines.[30]

Thus, the orthodox theologian can use the incarnation as a limiting principle, and rule out any predicates of human nature that are incompatible with the incarnation by saying they are non-essential to being human. Although Morris acknowledges that "employing…core theological convictions [like the incarnation] as a check and constraint on…metaphysical theorizing" is a legitimate strategy for an orthodox theologian, he cautions that this cannot mean that anything goes.[31] As noted above, Pawl argues that the claims of the ecumenical councils act as a check upon these attempts to defend the coherence of two-natures christology, because the councils themselves allege some seemingly incompatible predicates of Christ.

A second line of defense has been to deny that certain problematic divine attributes are actually Anselmian "great-making characteristics." As Morris notes, when a particular understanding of one of the divine attributes is demonstrated to be inconsistent, either with another attribute or with the incarnation, "the Anselmian can thank the critic for his help and conclude that those precise versions of the divine attributes are not the ones a maximally perfect being must exemplify."[32] However, he cautions that this avenue of defense should not be used to dispose of the Anselmian understanding of God

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[30] Morris, 65. Morris muddies his own argument by allowing that these characteristics may be essential to being merely human, but not to being fully human. This would mean that the human nature the Word assumed was that of fully human, while the rest of humanity possesses a different nature, that of merely human. This concession would be disastrous for the soteriological motivations behind two-natures christology, as I will explore below. Because I intend to allow these soteriological concerns to govern my own christological interpretation, I will not follow his argument in that concession. Instead I will accept his argument so far as it is helpful in highlighting the difference between a characteristic that is shared by most or all of a kind, and those characteristics that are considered essential to membership in that kind.
[31] Morris, 44.
[32] Morris, 87.

altogether. Rather, theologians should take into account both the Anselmian conception of the divine and "the data of religious experience and purported revelation."[33] Although not necessarily interested in defending conciliar christology, process theologians take this approach when they deny that impassibility and immutability are proper characteristics of the divine because they conflict with the idea of God as actively involved in a changing world. John Hick is unsympathetic to such attempts to revise the divine attributes, arguing that while this response can be coherently used to defend two-natures christology, it raises the danger that "in adjusting the concept of God to make divine incarnation possible one may jettison aspects of the concept that are religiously essential."[34] While his concern is justified, in light of the role that anthropocentric assumptions have played in shaping the tradition what is judged to be "religiously essential" needs to be re-examined as well.

Beyond simply denying that characteristics commonly attributed to either the divine or to human nature are essential to those natures, a third approach focuses on the meanings of the terms being used to describe those characteristics. While challengers have assumed that the definitions of attributes like immutability, impassibility, and omniscience were agreed upon (and incompatible with creaturely existence), some defenders of conciliar christology have argued that these terms are actually underdetermined by the tradition. In order to better understand this argument, we will examine attempts to refine the definitions of two divine attributes, omnipotence and immutability, in greater depth.

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[33] Morris, 87-88.
[34] Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate*, 73.

While both the Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople affirm that God is all-powerful, neither explains what all-powerful means. A deterministic definition of omnipotence holds that God actually decides and brings about everything that occurs—God and God alone possesses the power to act. Charles Hartshorne argues that this definition goes wrong by assuming that the "highest conceivable form of power…must be the power to determine every detail of what happens in the world."[35] Calling this the "tyrant ideal of power," he demonstrates that such determinacy results in the question of evil and the never-ending task of theodicy for one who subscribes to this understanding of divine omnipotence.[36] The inconsistency in affirming such power while also affirming creaturely freedom leads to what Stephen Davis calls "the paradox of omnipotence," the question of, "whether an omnipotent being can create a being it subsequently does not control, i.e. decides not to control."[37] Following Whitehead, Hartshorne resolves the paradox by defining God's power as the alluring power of beauty or love, the power "that influences all that happens but determines nothing in its concrete particularity."[38] Others have resolved the paradox by defining omnipotence as *the ability* to do whatever one wants to do, whether or not one exercises that ability, so long as it is actually possible (i.e. not logically incoherent—no square circles—and consistent with what has already

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[35] Charles Hartshorne, *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984) 10-11.

[36] Hartshorne, 11-19. See also Karl Barth's discussion of the almightiness of the Father, which he describes as the ability to do what God wills, without any rival power, but not as "power in itself." Barth argues that such "free arbitrariness" describes chaos and evil, "the danger by which the world that God created in continually threatened," and that which God rejected in creation. Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline* (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), 47-48.

[37] Stephen T. Davis, *Logic and the Nature of God*, (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983), 68.

[38] Hartshorne, 14 & 25.

occurred).[39] This definition would defend the theological commitment that there is no power that can thwart God's will while also leaving room for other creatures to exercise their own wills, provided that God intended to create free creatures.

Although this debate about omnipotence arises independently of the topic of incarnation, it is relevant to the coherence debates. This is because it demonstrates that even one of the most commonly acknowledged characteristics attributed to the divine admits of ambiguity in its definition. Furthermore, omnipotence defined as the ability to do what one wants does not conflict with conciliar claims or the Gospel accounts of Jesus' life. While Jesus underwent a great deal of hardship, culminating in his tortuous death by crucifixion, the Gospels claim that he underwent this hardship willingly. Even when contemplating his coming trial, Mark records Jesus as praying to the Father, "Not what I want, but what you want."[40] The author of Matthew makes explicit both Jesus' power to avoid the crucifixion and his willingness to undergo it in Jesus' response to one of his disciple's attempt to prevent his arrest: "Put your sword back into its place…Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the scriptures be fulfilled, which say it must happen in this way?"[41] The Gospel portrayals of Jesus imply that he had the power and ability to avoid suffering and death if he so chose, but that he did not exercise that power. This is coherent with the description of omnipotence as the ability to do what one

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[39] See Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977); Davis, *Logic and the Nature of God*, P.T. Geach "Omnipotence," and Morris, 91.
[40] Mark 14:36; Matt 26:39; Luke 22:42.
[41] Matt 26:52-54. Of course, passages like these are most likely to be challenged as inauthentic sayings of Jesus because they reflect both supernatural power and a messianic consciousness.

wants, including allowing other creatures to do things that the omnipotent one does not determine for them.

Immutability is another divine attribute that many theologians have felt the need to clarify before ever reaching the doctrine of the incarnation. Although challengers to conciliar christology assume that the divine attribute of immutability must be defined as being unable to change in any way, defenders argue that this definition is not consistent with scripture or common Christian claims about God. The Christian belief that God relates personally to changeable and changing human beings implies that in *acting on us* God is *reacting to us* as well. Several passages of scripture ascribe this sort of reacting to God. For example Genesis 6:5-6 describes God as "sorry that he had made humankind on the earth," while James 4:8 instructs, "Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you." Such descriptions cause difficulties for Christian interpreters who are invested in the absolute unchangeability of God, as can be seen in their strained interpretations of James 4:8. For example, Aquinas argues that this should not be taken to imply that God actually responds to human beings by drawing near, but rather should be understood metaphorically: "For as the sun is said to enter a house, or to go out, according as its rays reach the house, so God is said to approach to us, or to recede from us, when we receive the influx of His goodness, or decline from Him."[42]

It is in Aquinas and others like him that we find the logic behind definitions of immutability as an absolute absence of change. Aquinas holds that the most perfect being is the one that is entirely actualized, containing nothing that is merely potential.[43] If a being changes, it must be for the better or for the worse. If God could change for the

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[42] ST I.9.1.
[43] ST I.3.7, 4.1, 9.1.

better, then God would not be perfect before that change; and if God could change for the worse, then God would not be perfect after that change. In order for God to be completely actualized, then God cannot be capable of becoming anything more or less than God already is. In contrast to this "strong" definition of immutability, Stephen Davis notes the ambiguity inherent in our understanding of "change," differentiating between (at least) four different types of change: *relational change* in which x's relation to another being can change by virtue of a change in that other being rather than in x, *positional change* in which x moves from one place to another without gaining or losing properties, *temporal change* in which x passes through time, and *alteration* in which x possess a different property at one time than it does at another.[44] To say that something is unchanging, one must further specify in what ways it does not change. As Davis notes, no one denies that God is subject to relational change: "at one point [God] has the property of not being loved by Augustine and at another point has the property of being loved by him."[45] Instead they disagree as to whether the possibility of relational change can be *truly* considered change at all. From this it should be clear that even the strongest views of divine immutability allow for some instances in which a common use of change might be applied to the divine. According to Davis, divine immutability does not require a strict unchangeableness, but rather is "designed to preserve the view that God is faithful in keeping his promises, that his basic benevolent nature remains the same; that he is not fickle and capricious and can be relied upon."[46] Davis concedes that this assurance does require *a kind of changelessness* in "God's basic nature and faithfulness to his promises,"

[44] Davis, 42-43.
[45] Davis, 44.
[46] Davis, 48.

but denies that it requires a notion of God's being entirely unchanging in all other senses.[47] Davis' version of divine immutability has come to be called the "weak" view of immutability as opposed to the "strong" view that insists that God is absolutely unchanging in any way.[48]

While the weak version of immutability as faithfulness or reliability might satisfy someone who feels no constraint from church teachings, Pawl argues that it is inconsistent with the teachings of the ecumenical councils. The Council of Nicaea anathematized "those who say 'there once was when he was not', and 'before he was begotten he was not', and that he came to be from things that were not, or from another hypostasis or substance, affirming that the Son of God is subject to change or alteration."[49] That council did not seem interested in immutability as the Son's faithfulness, but were actually alleging something unchanging about his nature. As further evidence, Pawl offers two of Cyril's letters that were accepted by later councils.[50] In his "Third Letter to Nestorius," Cyril argues,

> He did not cast aside what he was, but although he assumed flesh and blood, he remained what he was, God in nature and truth. We do not say that his flesh was turned into the nature of the godhead or that the unspeakable Word of God was changed into the nature of the flesh. For he (the Word) is unalterable and absolutely unchangeable and remains always the same as the scriptures say.[51]

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[47] Davis, 48. For further discussion of the trait of divine immutability, see Norman Kretzman, "Omniscience and Immutability," in William Rowe and William Wainwright, eds., *Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1973); W. Norris Clark "A New Look at the Immutability of God," in Robert J. Roth, ed., *God: Knowable and Unknowable* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1973); P.T. Geach, *Logic Matters* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1972).

[48] Pawl, 107-108. See also Morris, 95-96.

[49] Tanner, 5. Cited in Pawl 16, 98-104.

[50] The Council of Chalcedon "accepted the synodical letters of the blessed Cyril…to Nestorius and to the Orientals" referring to Cyril's "Second Letter to Nestorius" and "Letter to John of Antioch," see Tanner, 85. However, Pawl notes that there is dispute as to whether the "Third Letter to Nestorius" was accepted at Chalcedon or the Second Council of Constantinople. Nevertheless, he argues that the consensus view is that this letter is part of "Conciliar Christology," Pawl, 12-13.

[51] Tanner, 51. Cited in Pawl 108, although Pawl begins his citation with the second sentence included in my quotation.

Furthermore, in his "Letter to John of Antioch," Cyril declares that,

> God the Word, who came down from above and from heaven, 'emptied himself, taking the form of a slave", and was called son of man, though all the while he remained what he was, that is God (for he is unchangeable and immutable by nature), he is said to have come down from heaven, since he is now understood to be one with his own flesh…[52]

Pawl argues, correctly I believe, that these citations indicate that Cyril did not understand divine immutability to be restricted to divine reliability, as the weak view claims. Disproving the weak view, however, is not the same thing as proving that Cyril had the strong view of immutability in mind.

While Cyril's letters use strong language to describe the Word's immutability—unalterable, absolutely unchangeable, remains always the same—they do so in conjunction with clear descriptions of change—he assumed flesh and blood, came down from above, emptied himself, and took a form. When trying to understand how an author is using a term, context is vital. For example, when the Council of Nicaea condemned those who affirmed "that the Son of God is subject to change or alteration," they were not anathematizing process theologians, or those seeking to refine the definition of immutability in modern contexts. Their condemnation was aimed at Arianism and the idea that the nature of the Word was not co-eternal or equally divine with the nature of the Father. Similarly, Cyril does not seem to be drawing from either the weak or the strong version of divine immutability. Rather, he specifies that there are ways in which the Word is said to "come down from above," empty himself, and take on a form, but that this does not entail his becoming something different from "God in nature and truth." Each reference the councils make to the unchanging divine nature is in the context of defending the incarnation from accusations that it implies a change of nature—that the

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[52] Tanner, 72. Cited by Pawl on 109, although Pawl ends his citation with the parenthetical.

nature itself turns into something else. They need not be taken as references to a characteristic of immutability, defined as an absolute lack of change, within persons who possess or exist in the divine nature.

Cyril's letters are not only condemnations of Nestorius' arguments, they are also defenses of his own. While Cyril condemned Nestorius for dividing the person of the Word based on the belief that two natures required two persons, Nestorius argued that Cyril was guilty of confusing the natures and saying that the divine nature was passible.[53] With this accusation in mind, we might better understand Cyril's argument that "We do not say that his flesh was turned into the nature of the godhead or that the unspeakable Word of God was changed into the nature of the flesh. For he…remains always the same as the scriptures say," as his defense against the charge of confusing the natures, rather than an assertion of the Word's absolute lack of any type of change. Significantly, Cyril applies his argument to *both* the divine and the human natures. Not only was the godhead not changed into "the nature of the flesh," but the flesh was not "turned into the nature of the godhead," either.

Immutability understood as the inability of one nature to be transformed into another lies at the heart of conciliar christology. For the ecumenical councils, the claims that Christ's divine nature remained truly divine and that Christ's human nature remained truly human were both necessitated by their soteriological commitments. Gregory of Nazianzus explained the soteriological concern behind these affirmations, arguing that, "The unassumed is the unhealed, but what is united with God is also being saved."[54] The

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[53] "Nestorius' Second Letter to Cyril" in Tanner, 45.

[54] Gregory of Nazianzus, "Letter 101," in *On God and Christ: The Five Theological Orations and Two Letters to Cledonius* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002), 158.

metaphysical understanding of salvation with which the councils were working was that Jesus saves by uniting the divine nature with the human nature that is in need of saving. If this union transformed human nature into something else rather than healing the nature itself, then the benefits of the union would not be transferable to other human beings. Similarly, if this union transformed divine nature into something else, then it would lose its power to save. If the natures combined to form a single hybrid nature, or *tertium quid*, then it would lose the divine power of salvation and be incapable of transferring whatever benefits this new nature derived from the union to other human beings. The conciliar language about the lack of change of the divine nature occurs in contexts that assert that the incarnation did nothing to alter what the nature was. They do not necessarily indicate that the divine nature includes immutability in the "strong" sense as a proper divine attribute.

Although Pawl argues against revising traditional definitions of incompatible predicates, his own defense of conciliar christology redefines all the attributes by adding a clause to each. Pawl inserts the clause, "possesses a concrete nature that is…" before what he assumes to be the standard definition of each attribute. Thus, Pawl redefines passible to mean "*has a concrete nature that* it is possible for some other thing to causally affect," and impassible to mean "*has a concrete nature that* it is impossible for some other thing to causally affect."[55] For any typical, one-natured being, these two terms would remain incompatible predicates. But for one person in two natures, each can be aptly predicated of the same person. Although there is some question as to whether the councils were alleging that impassibility meant the inability to be causally affected by

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[55] Pawl, 159 (emphasis added).

anything, Pawl offers a correct rendition of how the councils were using the predicates. Cyril's and Leo's tendencies to specify to which nature they attributed which sayings and actions of Jesus indicates that they would be satisfied with this addendum: we say that the Word suffered because the Word possesses a concrete human nature that was capable of suffering, and we say that the Word is incapable of suffering because the Word possesses a concrete divine nature that is incapable of suffering. This further explication of what the councils claimed, however, does little to address the underlying consistency problem. Instead, it demonstrates that the inconsistency alleged by coherence challenges lies at the level of the person, not the natures.

Pawl is correct that the Council of Chalcedon alleged that the divine nature is impassible. The "Definition of Faith" offered by the Council of Chalcedon (451), states that,

> There are those who are trying to ruin the proclamation of the truth, and through their private heresies they have spawned novel formulas…by introducing a confusion and mixture, and mindlessly imagining that there is a single nature of the flesh and the divinity, and *fantastically supposing that in the confusion the divine nature of the Only-begotten is passible*.[56]

Here it is clear that the authors do assume that the divine nature itself is impassible. This is further supported by the letters from Cyril and Leo that are cited with approval by the Council of Chalcedon.[57] In Cyril's "Second Letter to Nestorius," he argues that,

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[56] Tanner, 84 (emphasis added).

[57] Chalcedon states that "it has accepted the synodical letters of the blessed Cyril…to Nestorius and to the Orientals, as being well-suited to refuting Nestorius's mad folly and to providing an interpretation for those who in their religious zeal might desire understanding of the saving creed" and "To these it has suitably added, against false believers and for the establishment of orthodox doctrines, the letter of…Archbishop Leo, written to…Flavian to put down Eutyches's evil-mindedness, because it is in agreement with great Peter's confession and represents a support we have in common." Tanner 85. While I agree that this approval makes these letters suitable resources for understanding the way that certain concepts were used at the time, I do not accept that this approval means that the Council of Chalcedon has ruled that the letters are infallible in their every claim. They seem rather to have been accepted in the way a court accepts an *amicus* brief—as helpful but not determinative of the matter at hand.

> We say that he suffered and rose again, not that the Word of God suffered blows or piercing with nails or any other wounds in his own nature (for the divine, being without a body, is incapable of suffering); but because the body which became his own suffered these things, he is said to have suffered them for us. For he was without suffering, while his body suffered. Something similar is true of his dying. For by nature the Word of God is of itself immortal and incorruptible and life and life-giving, but since on the other hand his own body by God's grace, as the apostle says, tasted death for all, the Word is said to have suffered death for us.[58]

In Leo's "Letter to Flavian," the pope writes that "invulnerable nature was united to a nature that could suffer" and that Christ Jesus "could both on the one hand die and on the other be incapable of death."[59] It appears from these passages that the ecumenical councils do affirm that the divine nature is impassible, incapable of suffering and dying.

However, being incapable of suffering and dying does not require that one be unable to be causally affected by anything else. In fact, impassibility defined in this way is inconsistent with biblical portraits of God. In scripture, God grieves, repents, and changes God's mind in response to human actions.[60] Furthermore, there is some indication that Cyril did not have Pawl's definition of impassibility in mind, because when he writes of the divine nature's impassibility, he specifies that it is incapable of suffering *because it is incorporeal*. It is possible that when early theologians wrote about divine impassibility, they were building off of divine incorporeality to reach the conclusion that the divine nature cannot experience bodily suffering in a manner understood univocally with physical human suffering. This denial that the divine suffers physically could have later developed into the claim that the divine cannot be causally affected by anything else.

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[58] Tanner, 42.
[59] Tanner, 78.
[60] See Gen 6:5-8, Exod 32:14; 1 Sam 15:11; and Jonah 3:10.

As we have seen, attempts to defend conciliar christology from charges of inconsistency rest upon revising the definitions of what the divine and human attributes mean. Critics argue that such revisions are inappropriate and that any adequate defense must demonstrate how the claims are consistent using the critics' univocal definitions. Our examination of conciliar language, however, indicates that it is possible that the ecumenical councils did not have the critics' definitions in mind when they made these claims in the first place. Furthermore, one of the key tenets of any theology that alleges an ontological distinction between the divine and creatures has been that terms cannot be univocally predicated across that qualitative divide. It is to this traditional support for analogical predication that we now turn.

Analogical Predication

As we have noted, challenges to the coherence of conciliar christology begin with the assumption that we have *a priori* definitions of divine and human natures. Because challengers insist that the terms listed in both sets of predicates must be used univocally across the argument, if a proper human attribute is mutability defined as "being able to change in some way," then the proper divine attribute is immutability defined as "not being able to change in some way." The word "mutability" is used univocally across the definitions, and the only difference is the negating prefix im- (or in-). The error in this approach can be seen most clearly by starting with a divine attribute that is not simply the negation of a human characteristic, one like divine goodness.

Remember that Anselm argued that the God was whatever it was better to be than not to be, and this included being self-existent, creator of all things, just, truthful, happy, percipient, omnipotent, merciful, impassible, living, wise, good, eternal, and unbounded.

While some of the attributes on this list (self-existent, creator of all things, omnipotent, impassible, eternal, and unbounded) are key players in debates over the consistency of the incarnation, others (just, truthful, happy, percipient, merciful, living, wise, and good) are neglected by these debates because they are not denials of the human condition. Human beings can be just, truthful, happy, percipient, merciful, living, wise, and good. The fact that the Creator of all that is can be aptly characterized as good and that creatures can also be aptly characterized as good follows from Christian commitments to creation *ex nihilo*: because God is the Creator of all that exists, all that exists reflects God in some way. Therefore these terms are not used equivocally, with entirely different meanings when applied to the creature as opposed to when applied to the Creator. However, Christian commitments to creation *ex nihilo* also dictate that God does not possess these characteristics in the same way that creatures do. There is an ontological divide between the Creator and the creation. As Aquinas explains, these characteristics "belong properly to God, and more properly to Him than they belong to creatures…But as regards their mode of signification, they do not properly and strictly apply to God; for their mode of signification applies to creatures."[61] He therefore cautions that affirmative names are appropriately predicated of God, but "they fall short of a full representation of God" and they "signify the divine substance, but in an imperfect manner."[62] For this reason, the attribution of characteristics to God cannot be made either *univocally* or *equivocally* with attributions of such characteristics to human beings. Instead they must be understood to be *analogically* related. For Aquinas, this means that whatever is said of both God and creatures, like that they are good or living, "is said according to the relation

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[61] ST I.13.3
[62] ST I.13.2

of a creature to God as its principle and cause, wherein all perfections of things pre-exist excellently."[63]

Moving from positive names to the negative names that dominate challenges to conciliar christology, Aquinas argues that such negative statements "manifestly do not at all signify His substance, but rather express the distance of the creature from Him…*or rather, the relation of creatures to Himself*."[64] Immutable, impassible, and invisible cannot be understood as operating at the same level as mutable, passible, and visible do in the creaturely realm. Rather, they signify something about the relationship of creatures to the divine. But what do they signify? Anselm provides some insight into this line of reasoning. He did not stop with his argument that God is that than which nothing greater can be thought. Further in the *Proslogion*, he concludes that God is "something greater than can be thought."[65] For Anselm the inability of human beings to properly see God derives from our "own darkness," not from an attribute of divine invisibility.[66] Similarly, our inability to hear, smell, taste, and touch God stems from the fact that the senses of our souls "have been stiffened, dulled, and obstructed by the longstanding weakness of sin."[67] Based on this argument, the attributes of invisibility and incorporeality are better understood as expressing the inability of created beings to comprehend the divine nature than as positive attributes of that nature.

Both Anselm and Aquinas, the two medieval scholastics whose names are most frequently associated with the incompatible predications involved in coherence

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[63] ST I.13.5
[64] ST I.13.2 (emphasis added).
[65] Anselm, 90.
[66] Anselm, 89.
[67] Anselm, 91.

challenges, gave grounds for thinking that the divine attributes cannot be defined in the ways that challengers to conciliar christology assume they are defined. According to both Anselm and Aquinas, it is proper to name God with those perfections that we understand so far as our created intellects and experiences permit us to understand them, but it is improper for us to believe that we have thus truly characterized the divine nature. Theologians should understand that the definitions of those terms are not *and cannot be fixed* with the level of precision that those challenging conciliar christology assume they have been. When Hick argued that the claim of a literal incarnation *without further explanation* was as incoherent as claiming that there is such a thing as a square circle, he placed the burden of explicating why the terms should be defined in a different manner than he understood them on those who affirm the traditional doctrine of the incarnation.[68] Brian Hebblethwaite responded by arguing that the coherence of the incarnation is rooted in the fact that we do not know the nature of God,

> It is precisely because we are *not* operating with a readily available concept or picture of God, but pointing away from our own pictures to an infinite transcendent reality much greater than anything we can think or say that we can consider the possibility that God is literally such as to be able, without ceasing to be God, to make himself known in human form.[69]

Anyone debating the coherence of conciliar christology should be as clear as possible as to how they are defining their terms, and challengers cannot claim a presumption of correctness for definitions that generate the inconsistencies in the first place.

Anthropocentric distortions have contributed to the idea that the divine attributes refer to certain fixed and shared definitions. Language has long been considered one of the most significant properties that sets human beings apart from other animals. It is a

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[68] John Hick, *The Myth of God Incarnate* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977).
[69] Brian Hebblethwaite, "Incarnation—the Essence of Christianity?" in *Theology* (March 1997) 80:674, 90.

powerful tool, and communication has allowed human culture to develop and flourish. But we can place too much confidence in the capacity of language to adequately mediate, whether such mediation is between individual human perspectives or between the creaturely realm and that of the divine. Aquinas believed that it was proper for human beings to name God, but he never indicated that such naming was a perfect mediation of divine reality to the human intellect. Instead, he allows that "we can give a name to anything *in as far as we can understand it*."[70] Similarly, our naming communicates our meaning insofar as the person to whom we are speaking or writing understands what we mean by that name. But because intellect and language are supposed to be the special province of human beings, we have a tendency to believe that both are more accurate mediators of reality than they in fact are. Hence, the beliefs that (1) a list of divine attributes possesses definitions agreed upon by all parties, and (2) that those definitions adequately describe the divine nature, are both distorted by anthropocentric assumptions about the powers of human speech.

As we have seen, challenges to the coherence of conciliar christology are linguistically based and reflect anthropocentric valuations of what characteristics make something "great." They begin with the assumptions that there are certain characteristics that a being must exhibit in order to be divine, and that we can and do know what some of these characteristics are. As I have argued, the characteristics that make up such lists of necessary divine attributes are shaped by the preferences of those making the lists. Since human beings have compiled the lists of divine attributes, they are inevitably anthropocentrically biased. Less apparent, however, is the anthropocentric distortion

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[70] ST I.13.1 (emphasis added).

inherent in the procedure by which both sides to this debate have advanced their arguments. Attempts to generate the correct definition of the divine attribute in question, whichever attribute that might be, are ultimately futile. Even Anselm and Aquinas agree that the language we use about God, however appropriate that language might be, cannot adequately comprehend the truth of the divine nature. Therefore, it is not a weakness for conciliar christology that its proponents argue that we must begin with the incarnation in order to understand either human or divine nature. Rather, this approach recognizes that the doctrine of the incarnation, like the life of Jesus as portrayed in the Gospels, challenges our preconceived notions of God. How can defenders of conciliar christology be asked to reconcile this doctrine with the very preconceptions that it challenges?

In Chapter 4 we will examine a framework for understanding divinity and humanity that places these kinds of challenges in a different setting. But first we turn to a second set of challenges to the doctrine of the incarnation, those based on the implausibility of God becoming a particular human being at a particular time and in a particular place.

Plausibility Challenges

The modern crisis of implausibility, which Wesley J. Wildman describes as the loss of "rational grounds for distinguishing Christological beliefs from fantasy, irrationality, and projective wishing," is tied to the Enlightenment's focus on equality among human beings.[71] The primacy of reason as the ultimate guide for human action and the foundation for human equality carried with it a sharp critique of all claims to

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[71] Wesley J. Wildman, *Fidelity with Plausibility: Modest Christologies in the Twentieth Century* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 2.

"special revelation" that was not equally accessible to all persons.[72] This critique

extended to the doctrine of the incarnation and what Wildman calls the *absolutist*

principle in christology: "the assertion that the symbol of Jesus Christ is absolutely,

uniquely, exhaustively, unsurpassably significant for revelation and salvation."[73] Echoing

earlier critiques of special revelation, John Hick argues that the scandal of particularity

inherent in such absolutist renderings can better be understood as "the scandal of

restricted access, or of limited revelation."[74] In the modern period, challenges to the

doctrine based on the scandal of particularity are grounded in three developments: new

understandings of the universe, growing knowledge of other cultures and religions, and

recognition that the doctrine has been used to justify different forms of oppression based

on particular characteristics—real or imagined—of the man, Jesus of Nazareth. Each of

these developments emphasize the inequity of making salvation contingent on something

not equally accessible to all people. Those who challenge the plausibility of the

incarnation on these grounds understand the problem to be a christological one, founded

on the claim that one man can be universally salvific. In this section and further in

Chapter 5, I will argue that the problem is actually shaped by anthropocentric distortions

of soteriology in which the work of the incarnation is understood primarily through the

lens of revelation, rather than as an ontological matter.

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[72] Ironically, Aquinas appealed to the opposite argument, that natural reasoning was not equally available, in his argument that revelation was necessary for the truth to be accessible to all people: "because the truth about God such as reason could discover, would only be known by a few...and with the admixture of many errors" ST I.1.1.

[73] Wildman, 7.

[74] Hick, 178.

A Vast Cosmos

Our understanding of the universe is undeniably different than the understanding held by the earliest Christians. Not only has the Ptolemaic, geocentric cosmology been supplanted by a heliocentric model that places the sun at the center of the solar system, we have also come to know that the universe is much larger than previously imagined—composed of billions of galaxies, each containing billions of stellar systems. We now know that the earth is not the center of the cosmos, but a tiny part of it. Scientific advances have enabled us to construct a cosmology that boggles the mind with the vastness of the universe. This recognition has led many to argue that the idea that God would become incarnate on this single planet for the lifespan of one single man is as erroneous as the idea that the sun orbits the earth. The reasoning behind this objection is not nearly as clear as its proponents assume, however. The difference in magnitude between the universe as it was understood two thousand years ago and as it is understood now does not explain how the claim for the universal significance of one man's life was once believable and yet no longer is. The earth itself is very large, and it is far beyond the ability of any human being to establish a personal relationship with every inhabitant of it. Nevertheless, Christians have long held that God is capable of such a feat. Even those who argue that our current knowledge of the cosmos calls the doctrine of the incarnation into question do not deny that God can be personally interested in every human being. It remains unclear, therefore, how current cosmologies generate a context for salvation that outstrips the abilities of God.

The argument that the vastness of the universe renders the doctrine of the incarnation implausible may stem from an anthropocentric obsession with size. The

argument that the make-up of the universe gives lie to the claims of the incarnation seems

to stem from our psychology as much as anything else—Vernon White notes that "the

smaller our world is, the bigger we conceive the scope of reconciliation. So it should not

surprise us if the reverse is also true, that the bigger our world, the more limited that

scope of reconciliation."[75] Those making this argument assume that ancient claims about

the divine must stand and fall with ancient claims about the make-up of the universe.

Because the universe turns out to be bigger—much, much bigger—than early Christians

believed, so this line of thinking goes, their claims about the incarnation become

implausible. But why? What was "plausible" in this sense about the incarnation, whatever

size the universe might be? Was it plausible that one man could be God incarnate if there

are 20 million people on the planet, but not 10 billion? Could the incarnation be effective

for this planet and all the heavenly bodies the eye could see, but not for the numerous

galaxies and solar systems we can now see with the aid of powerful telescopes? Against

such arguments, Thomas Morris observes that, "it is a bit difficult to see exactly what

about distinctively modern knowledge of the scale of the universe is thought to show the

absurdity of any religious beliefs based on the assumption that the earth and human

beings are important to the Creator of all."[76] The idea that the universe is too big for the

doctrine of the incarnation to be plausible seems to be a category mistake based on the

assumption that the divine nature, while much more powerful and much more effective

than human beings, possesses limits that prevent it from operating over certain expanses

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[75] Vernon White, *Atonement and Incarnation: An essay in universalism and particularity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 2 (discussing F. W. Dillistone's *The Christian Understanding of Atonement*).
[76] Morris, 166.

of space and/or time. This view understands the divine as quantitatively superior to, but not qualitatively other than, human beings.

An alternative version of this argument suggests that the size and make-up of the universe calls into question Christian assumptions about the importance of humanity. Traditional understandings of humanity as the crown of creation granted dominion over all the rest have supported this idea that humanity is of central importance. According to this reasoning, the incarnation is only plausible if human beings are more important to God than are other created beings. Such importance was plausible in a smaller universe, or one in which everything was ordered around human beings, or in which human beings had a special origin separate from other living beings. With scientific discoveries of the size and ordering of the universe, and about the evolutionary emergence of human beings through processes that govern the development of all life on this planet, such assumptions that human beings are held in particular divine esteem are undermined. [77] There are several responses to these arguments. If one wishes to continue to argue that human beings are, nevertheless, exceptionally important to God one need only observe that size, centrality, and special origin are indications of particular value for human beings, and that it is highly anthropomorphic to insist that God follows a similar pattern in valuing members of creation.[78] Setting aside hierarchies of valuation, the tradition has long held that human beings have a unique ontological position because we are both material and immaterial. Based on this reasoning, which will be taken up in the final section on

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[77] However, see Morris' description of this argument, in which it appears that even non-biological exceptionality would be sufficient to secure our exceptional importance if, for instance, human beings had a unique metaphysical makeup or vocation—which scientific advances have not been able to plausibly disprove (166-168).

[78] Morris, 166.

"Human Exceptionalism," God became incarnate as a human being because human nature bridges the great divides of the created order, thus allowing the incarnate Word to overcome all divisions in union.[79] Alternatively, one could concede that it is completely possible that human beings are not more significant than are any other parts of creation, and yet God became incarnate as a human being. While this seems difficult to swallow considering the central value many religions have placed on human destiny, it parallels the argument that men are not more significant than are women, and yet God became incarnate as a man and not a woman. If one is committed to reexamining the doctrine of the incarnation while resisting androcentrism and anthropocentrism, then this is a necessary response to such challenges.

Even if the size and make-up of the universe do not render the doctrine of the incarnation implausible, those who attack the plausibility of the incarnation go on to argue that the possibility of sentient life on other planets undermines the doctrine. John Hick notes that discoveries about the immensity of the universe led "Western thinkers…to speculate about the possibility of divine incarnations on other planets."[80] C.S. Lewis takes up this question in his cosmic trilogy, particularly in the book *Perelandra,* which portrays a paradisiacal planet with one humanoid pair facing temptation.[81] Human fascination with the possibility of extra-terrestrial life is often shaped by the assumption that the history of such another sentient population would

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[79] See Maximus the Confessor's treatment of these divisions in "Difficulty 41," [1304D-1305B], in Andrew Louth, *Maximus the Confessor* (London: Routledge, 1996) 156-157.

[80] John Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate: Christology in a Pluralistic Age* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993, 2005) 89. This argument is also advanced in Paul and Linda Badham, *Immortality or Extinction?* (London: Macmillan, 1982).

[81] C.S. Lewis, *Perelandra* (London: Bodley Head, 1943).

follow a pattern similar to our own.[82] If the temptation, the Fall, and the Passion are central to earth-history, then they would have to be replicated in the histories of other planets as well. Not only would all be estranged from God, each would be reconciled through an incarnation on their planet. According to this argument, the Son would need to be continually incarnated on new planets to save different fallen creatures. The assumption of this line of argumentation seems to be that extra-terrestrial life would need access to *knowledge* of the incarnation in order for it to be effective. These objections are the cosmic expansion of the equity argument against special revelation: it would not be just for God to reveal God's self to one people—or the inhabitants of one planet—rather than to all.

While arguments against the doctrine of the incarnation based on the possibility of sentient life on other planets seem to be striking against the anthropocentric—and earth-centric—distortions of Christianity, they are in fact based on further implicit anthropocentrism. First, they are only concerned with sentient life and they disregard the rest of the material universe. Whether or not life exists in any other part of the universe, we do know that the universe is filled with created materiality. The fact that only sentient life renders plural incarnations necessary in these arguments indicates a species bias— only life that is like human life *as to its rationality* would require an incarnation. Second, this "sentiocentrism" reflects an anthropocentric understanding of *how* the incarnation

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[82] It is worth noting that similar thinking was used to justify colonial imperialism. Societies that did not resemble Western developments were assumed to be developing along the same trajectory as Western society. They were therefore considered primitive versions of society in need of Christian European enlightenment. Interestingly, the same idea is used in the genre of science fiction in an anti-colonial manner, notably in the "prime directive" of the *Star Trek* universe. Under this reasoning, all alien populations that the crew encountered that had not yet achieved warp technology were understood to be primitive versions of those populations that made up the Federation. Their eventual development along similar trajectories was always assumed.

affects whomever it does affect. These arguments imply that the effects of the incarnation must be realized through the cognitive process of belief. In this schema, the saving power of the incarnation depends on belief in the saving power of the incarnation. This understanding of the effect of the incarnation, however, already excludes those who lived before the time of Jesus, those who lived on other continents prior to the global expansion of Christianity, those who otherwise fail to hear about Jesus, and those whose cognitive processes prevent them from understanding and therefore believing in the story of Jesus. It excludes most of terrestrial creation along with many human beings before we ever reach the exclusion of possible extraterrestrial life. If cognitive processes such as belief are necessary for the incarnation to be effective, then it is not effective for the majority of creatures even if the soteriological horizon is limited to Earth.

An alternative to this perceived injustice has been constructed by arguing that human beings who have and exercise the capacity to believe mediate the salvation they receive thereby to the rest of creation—at least on this planet. This reflects an anthropocentric distortion by placing certain privileged human beings in the role of mediator between God and other parts of creation. Considering Jesus' role as the great High Priest, positioning human beings in the role of mediator seems to be an idolatrous overreaching on the part of one species that assumes that this place of honor must belong to it and it alone. Furthermore, this approach continues to require the communication of revealed truths, in which case human beings would be ineffective mediators to life on other planets over which we have no influence, to those who died before such revelation reached them, and to all of those beings that are not capable of cognitively grasping such revelation. But this brings us back to the anthropocentric assumption that the salvation

mediated through the incarnation is only effective through the cognitive capacities of those it affects. An understanding of a single incarnation that is effective for all of the cosmos requires a different mechanism for salvation than that of cognitive belief—whether or not life exists on other planets.

According to those who challenge the doctrine of the incarnation on grounds of plausibility, the alternatives are to do away with a literal understanding of the incarnation, or to concede that there must be an astronomically high number of incarnations to account for all the other sentient life-forms that have existed, do exist, or will exist in the future somewhere in the universe. Morris notes, however, that an alternative understanding of salvation "favored by some of the Eastern church Fathers" can solve the problem by holding that the incarnation metaphysically transforms human nature, a situation in which knowledge of the incarnation is not required for it to be effective.[83] Against this view, he simply notes that "this has not been a very popular understanding of the salvation made by Christ. Dominant models of salvation have required a response on the part of the created individual being saved."[84] But while it is true that this objective, or metaphysical, understanding of the incarnation is not popular today, I would argue that this is because it undercuts the anthropocentric distortions that have prioritized cognitive appropriation of revelation over any other mechanism for salvation. As will be further developed in Chapter 5, understanding the work of the incarnation to be achieved objectively through the incarnation rather than subjectively through a cognitive response to the incarnation enables us to understand it as effective outside the limits of human rationality.

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[83] Morris, 175-176.
[84] Morris, 176.

There is one final reason that extraterrestrial life might require multiple incarnations. If the incarnation is understood to work in an objective but exclusivist manner, in which the divine nature is united with *human* nature but not with whatever nature is possessed by life on other planets, then it would not be effective for those other life forms. While understanding the work of the incarnation objectively opens the way to viewing it as effective for those human beings excluded by their lack of knowledge or capacity for belief, it can still exclude the rest of material reality along with extraterrestrial life. As will be more fully developed in chapter 3, the Chalcedonian framework can be interpreted in such a way that the incarnation is immediately effective for the entire cosmos, but in order to do so, *nature* and *essence* will need to be reconceived in a manner inclusive of all of material creation.

A Religiously Plural Context

The second argument against the plausibility of the incarnation has to do with the increasingly pluralistic context of Western societies. In many ways tied to the argument that sentient life on other planets would require multiple incarnations, the plurality argument is also based on notions of equity. The populations of the world have not had equal access to the special revelation of the incarnation, and this lack of equity makes salvation on the basis of it unjust. Against the claim that Jesus Christ is uniquely salvific, Wildman offers two "modest Christologies" as alternatives to the exclusivity of such claims: an incarnational christology that makes room for multiple incarnations within human history, thus allowing adherents to recognize that more than one religion can be equally revelatory, and an inspirational christology that understands incarnation as a

metaphor that can be applied to other religious leaders as well as to Jesus Christ.[85] Either alternative allows adherents to acknowledge important figures in other religions as incarnations equivalent to Jesus in saving efficacy.

The concern for true interreligious respect that motivates these moves is admirable. Hick's dissatisfaction with claims of a literal incarnation are related directly to religious parity, as he argues "the Christian superiority-complex in relation to the peoples of other faiths," and antisemitism in particular, are "great historical evils [which] have been validated specifically by appeal to the doctrine of the incarnation."[86] Both Wildman and Hick are concerned by Christian claims that other religions are either mistaken or idolatrous. While they continue to think and write within the Christian symbolic world, they do not want to disparage other religious symbolic worlds by claiming any superiority for Christian understanding. Their cosmopolitan acceptance of at least the potential truth of non-Christian religious traditions is an important argument against the christological developments that they critique. As they argue, Christian claims to possess unique or superior revelation in the Gospels lead to a disparagement of other religious traditions, whether or not this slight is intentional. The claim that there is no salvation but through Christianity does tend to polarize the world between the saved and the unsaved. Christian responses to these consequences of absolutist claims have varied widely. Certain evangelical movements see this not as a valid argument against Christian claims, but as the impetus behind missionary activity—it is imperative that they share their special revelation with those who have not yet received it. On the opposite end of the spectrum, many have rejected Christianity because of what they see as its ignorance and

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[85] Wildman, 8.
[86] Hick, 80.

intolerance of other religious beliefs. Wildman, Hick, and others who have tried to reconstruct christology along metaphorical and non-absolutist lines fall somewhere in between. My proposal seeks to affirm the incarnation as an absolute, unique, exhaustive, and unsurpassable event—as envisioned by the early church and codified in Chalcedon's definition—while also allowing that divine revelation and religious truth can be mediated through many religious traditions, and not exclusively through Christianity.

The weight of this dilemma, as I understand it, rests on the understanding of salvation and the means of salvation held by the person making the argument. Hick is very clear about his understanding: salvation is "centrally concerned with a radical betterment or transformation of the human situation."[87] Under this definition of salvation, the truth of religious claims can be judged by "their fruits in human life."[88] A religion that makes people less self-centered and more moral possesses a true way to salvation. Using this standard of salvation, Hick claims that virtue and vice are distributed throughout the world in roughly equal measure, and that therefore "no one of the great world religions stands out as more salvific than the others."[89] The trouble with Hick's approach is his definition of salvation. First, as he acknowledges, not all religions aspire towards salvation, so his adoption of salvation as a measure for all religions already imposes certain Christian assumptions on the conversation. Second, an understanding of salvation as the moral betterment of individuals is certainly not a consensus view even among Christians. Hick has adopted as his standard a distinctly modern, secular measure,

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[87] Hick, 135.
[88] Hick, 136.
[89] Although Hick notes that such judgment must be empirical, he acknowledges that his argument rests on anecdotes, "a haphazard and impressionistic body of data" (138-139). While I do not challenge his conclusion that virtue and vice appear to be distributed throughout the world and its various religions, he would have been better served never offering "empirical" criteria to judge the question if he has no better evidence than he offers.

"being better people," and then applied that to the world's religions as if it were their own goals.

Like arguments based on the possibility of sentient life on other planets, this argument holds that the problem lies in the particularity of the incarnation, but its objections reveal the anthropocentric assumptions undergirding it. Not all people have equal access to the revelation of the incarnation, and therefore the incarnation cannot be uniquely salvific. If it were, it would privilege some populations—mainly those born into Christian communities—while disadvantaging others whose religio-cultural settings make Christian claims seem less plausible. This argument only holds if the incarnation accomplishes its work through the rational acceptance of certain claims (or, on Hick's terms, the adoption and enactment of certain moral precepts), which I argued in the previous section reflects an anthropocentric emphasis on human cognitive capacities. If the incarnation operates on human beings—and whatever else it operates on—at an ontological level rather than an epistemological one, then the issues of equity would be avoided. No one would be eternally privileged or punished on the basis of the religio-cultural group into which they were born. Once again, it is the soteriological emphasis on revelation rather than the particular claims of the incarnation that creates this conundrum.

Liberationist Critiques

The final argument against the doctrine of the incarnation on the basis of plausibility takes a slightly different approach. John Hick critiques the doctrine of the incarnation because "it is inherently liable to dangerous misuse by fallen human nature."[90] In addition to the problems it creates for religious pluralism, he argues that the

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[90] Hick, 80.

doctrine has also been used to justify "colonial exploitation of the Third (or two-thirds) World" and "Western patriarchalism."[91] Hick relates these historical evils to the doctrine of the incarnation by demonstrating that the Church's emphasis on the importance of certain characteristics of the man Jesus can lead to the marginalization of those who do not share those characteristics.

This can be demonstrated most easily in the case of Christian patriarchy. Of all the personal properties Jesus must have possessed, ontological emphasis has historically fallen on his gender. As Mary Daly notes,

> The 'particularity' of Jesus' maleness has not functioned in the same way as the 'particularity' of his Semitic identity or of his youth. Non-Semites or persons over, say, thirty-three, have not been universally excluded from the priesthood on the basis that they do not belong to the same ethnic group or age group as Jesus. By contrast, the universal exclusion of women from the priesthood, and until recently from the ministry in most Protestant churches, has been justified on this basis. The functioning of the Christ image in Christianity to legitimate sexual hierarchy has frequently been blatant.[92]

Women were barred from ordination on the basis of arguments that "since Jesus was male, women cannot be ordained," and "there must be a 'physical resemblance' between a priest and Christ."[93] Daly points out the explicit connection between the incarnation and Christian patriarchy, arguing that, "It is still not unusual for Christian priests and ministers, when confronted with the issue of women's liberation, to assert that God 'became incarnate' uniquely as a male and then to draw arguments for male supremacy from this."[94] However, the fact that Christian patriarchy has singled out one particular

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[91] Hick, 80.

[92] Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973) 79.

[93] Daly, discussing Episcopalian Bishop C. Kilmer Myers' assertion in 1972 (4), and Hick, referring to the Vatican's Declaration on the Question of Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood in 1976 (86).

[94] Daly, 70.

characteristic of Jesus for special ontological significance, but not others, indicates that the doctrine of the incarnation is not the source of this problem.[95] If the doctrine were to blame, then groups sharing Jesus' other characteristics would be privileged in a manner similar to the privilege that men have exercised in the Christian church. The fact that they have not been so privileged indicates that androcentric interpretation of the doctrine, rather than the doctrine itself, lies at the heart of Christian patriarchy. Nevertheless, the doctrine has exacerbated the patriarchal assumptions that were already present in the Mediterranean roots of Western society. This reasoning has led some feminist interpreters to question the relevance of Christianity for women, as can be seen in Rosemary Radford Ruether's question of whether a male savior can save women.[96]

There are other examples in which the incarnation has been tied to the characteristics of the persons in power at a particular time and in a particular place in order to justify oppression of those who do not possess those characteristics. This can be seen in the historical inaccuracy of modern Western portraits that represent Jesus as white. The belief held by many white Christians that Christ was also white contributes to the dehumanizing "othering" that is implicit in colonial exploitation and racial degradation. Like Daly and Hick, many find that the relationship between the underlying doctrine of the incarnation and these bad uses to which it has been applied undermines the plausibility of the doctrine itself.

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[95] Daly would disagree with my claim here. Regarding the oppressive uses of the doctrine of the incarnation, she asks, "If the symbol can be 'used' that way and in fact has a long history of being 'used' that way, isn't this an indication of some inherent deficiency in the symbol itself?" (72). To her objection, echoed by Hick, I can only respond that the oppressive use of a symbol only demonstrates the power of the symbol, not its relative goodness or evilness. Any powerful symbol can be turned to constructive or destructive uses.

[96] Rosemary Radford Ruether, *To Change the World: Christology and Cultural Criticism*, (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 45.

These issues may be associated with two anthropocentric assumptions that have played a significant role in the history of Christian reflection on the incarnation. The first is that, if God were to become incarnate, God would only become incarnate as the best possible material being. That the doctrine holds that God became incarnate as a human male fulfilled the patriarchal expectations of what the best possible created being must be. However, there are other ways of understanding God's choice of material beings, as will be explored more fully in Chapter 6. God might choose to become incarnate as the material being most in need of help—the one that was most fallen. Alternatively, God might have become incarnate as a human because of the ontological makeup of human beings, who possess both a material body and an immaterial soul.[97] Or God might choose to become incarnate as a material body, but which kind of body could be as theologically irrelevant as the tradition has found Jesus' eye color or height. The Christic hymn of Philippians 2:5-11 does not emphasize the dignity or majesty of the form that the incarnation took, but rather focuses on the condescension of Christ in taking such a lowly human form. The claim that the Word became incarnate as a human male could thus be seen as an indictment of anthropo- and andro-centrism, rather than their affirmation.

The second anthropocentric distortion involves the emphasis placed on certain characteristics—such as race, gender, and, as I will argue later, species—as if they were soteriologically significant distinctions. Justifications of patriarchy and racial oppression that appeal to the incarnation argue that Jesus' maleness or his whiteness are essential characteristics of the incarnation. Unlike hair or eye color, according to this argument, race and gender are characteristics that have deeper ontological significance such that the

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[97] See Maximus the Confessor, "Difficulty 41," in Andrew Louth, *Maximus the Confessor* (London: Routledge, 1996) 156-162.

incarnation itself indicates the superiority of those who share these characteristics. Once

again, this construction reflects a distorting anthropocentric bias in its selection of

essential characteristics that are most relevant to human beings and the power structures

of human cultures: race is a category that only applies to human beings, and gender is not

an applicable category for most material bodies.[98] However, this essentializing of

particular characteristics can be separated from the doctrine of the incarnation itself, as

can be seen in feminist challenges to the androcentric idea that maleness is a

theologically significant characteristic of the incarnation. As Elizabeth Johnson argues,

> Jesus' sex is simply an intrinsic part of his own identity as a finite human being in
> time and space…In view of all the non-negotiable concreteness of his person, it is
> clear that Jesus' own historical humanity is not inclusive at all but a very
> particular crystallization of our common humanity, which can be actualized in a
> dizzying multiplicity of ways…Maleness is not constitutive of the essence of
> Christ, but in the Spirit, redeemed and redeeming humanity is.[99]

Without falling into a docetic trap of denying that Jesus possessed any of the

characteristics that make up "the non-negotiable concreteness" of personhood, Johnson

separates those characteristics from what she sees as essential in the incarnation—his

humanity. In Chapter 3, I will build on Johnson's argument against essentializing any of

the personally specific *idiomata* of the incarnation to argue that even membership in the

human species is not "constitutive of the essence of Christ," but that redeemed and

redeeming creatureliness is.

 As we have seen, the challenges to the doctrine of the incarnation that focus on

the scandal of particularity stem from three anthropocentric distortions: the assumption

that salvation operates through the cognitive appropriation of the incarnation, the belief

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[98] But note that the relevance of race and gender even to human bodies is becoming more contested.

[99] Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 163-164.

that the material body assumed in the incarnation possesses some ontological superiority to other material bodies, and the treatment of certain personal characteristics of Jesus as soteriologically significant. The first distortion makes salvation contingent upon the possession of certain cognitive faculties that enable individual persons to perceive and respond to the incarnation. According to these arguments, the limited scope of special revelation violates notions of equity and justice that a good divine power would uphold, and it does so by privileging some populations while excluding others from the possibility of salvation. I agree. *If* salvation is contingent on a cognitive response of some sort—whether belief, commitment, trust, or moral reform—to the special revelation of the incarnation of the Second Person of the Trinity in the man Jesus, mediated through the reasoning capacities of the individual making that response, then such a proposition would exclude too much of this good creation to be just or plausible.

What these arguments fail to consider, however, is the possibility that problem lies with the assumption that salvation is contingent on cognitive capacities, rather than with the doctrine of the incarnation *per se*. The failure to critique the cognitive aspects of this soteriological understanding reflects the insidiousness of anthropocentric distortions. Reason has long been considered the sole province of human beings, the capacity that sets us apart from the rest of creation as something of a different order. Therefore it is assumed that reason must have a special function in the story of salvation. In actuality, the early church used many metaphors to describe how Jesus saves, and reason played a role in only some of those metaphors. The great physician needs no rationality on the part of patients in order to heal them, and light illuminates the non-sentient as well as the sentient. Yeast leavens flour without waiting for the flour to cognitively acknowledge the

presence of yeast. Anthropocentric biases lead to the exclusion of a multitude of

traditional Christian understandings of the work of the incarnation that have nothing to do

with human cognitive capacities, while elevating revelation and cognitive response to it

as the primary mode of salvation. Even within the human world, this leads to an ableist

distortion that would seem to exclude not only those who have not received the special

revelation, but also those whose cognitive development does not allow their

understanding or acceptance of it. These critics are correct that there is something wrong

with the claim that salvation is dependent upon the special revelation of the incarnation.

They are wrong is assuming that this necessarily undermines the doctrine of the

incarnation. Instead, it undermines their notion that salvation must be contingent on a

cognitive response to special revelation. We will explore non-cognitive soteriological

metaphors more fully in Chapter 5.

The second and third distortions have to do with the ontological significance of

the characteristics of the material form assumed in the incarnation. This can be seen in

issues surrounding the ordination of women—and Christian patriarchy more generally—

as well as in arguments regarding the necessity of plural incarnations in the case of

extraterrestrial life. The Chalcedonian definition states that Jesus Christ is *homoousios*

with the Father as to his divinity and *homoousios* with us as to his humanity. The

challenge here rests on defining the *ousia*, or substance, of humanity. In the case of

patriarchy, the question is whether women are included in this *ousia*, or whether gender is

a distinction that lies at the level of *ousia*. While few would argue that women are not

saved by the incarnation, the reasoning behind traditional bans on the ordination of

women seems to hold that there is something soteriologically significant about the

maleness of Christ. Androcentrism has used ambiguity about the significance of Jesus' personal characteristics to bolster Christian patriarchy.

The extraterrestrial argument avoids this androcentrism but still holds that *ousia* assumed in the incarnation is distinctively human and would not be similarly efficacious for another life form—one that would presumably possess an *ousia* of its own. This brings us to the anthropocentric foundation of this line of challenges to the particularity of Christ: the assumption that human *ousia* is an exclusive category, one that applies only to human beings and not to other parts of the created order. But there is reason to argue, as I will in Chapter 3, that it is more theologically fruitful to understand *ousia* more expansively as something common to all material bodies.[100] As will be more fully developed in Chapters 3 and 4, this opens the way for understanding Chalcedon without the anthropocentric distortions that have affected the christologies developed on its foundation. Under this reasoning, when we affirm that Jesus Christ is *homoousios* with us, we affirm his consubstantiality with the whole created sphere.[101] This carries with it implications for all material bodies, whether human or not, sentient or not, and animate or not.

Challenges of plausibility that assail traditional christological claims on the basis of the scandal of particularity have drawn strength from modern ideals of equality for all human beings. However, these challenges rest on anthropocentric assumptions about the mechanism of salvation and the meaning of *ousia*. We will examine alternatives to these

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[100] In the first section, we saw that many characteristics commonly used to define human nature already tend in this direction and are applicable to a wide range of created beings.

[101] Andrew Linzey makes a similar claim, arguing that "the *ousia* assumed in the incarnation is not only specifically human, it is also creaturely," in *Animal Theology* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994) 10.

assumptions further in Chapters 3, 4, and 5. Before leaving this discussion of the challenges to the incarnation, however, we will examine how ecotheological re-interpretations of the doctrine of the incarnation have expanded its soteriological significance beyond the merely human.

Human Exceptionalism: An Ecotheological Concern with the Incarnation

When White named Christianity as the root of our ecological troubles, he argued that the creation stories of Genesis, church teachings that the creation of human beings foreshadowed the incarnation, and the belief that humanity "shares…God's transcendence of nature," all combined to make Christianity "the most anthropocentric religion the world has ever seen."[102] Hyperbole aside, White was not alone in sensing that the incarnation supported Western ideas of human exceptionalism and our transcendence of nature. In his 1961 address to the World Council of Churches, Joseph Sittler invoked the Colossian hymn to contradict what he saw as the "personal, pastoral, too purely spiritual, [and] static" view of modern Christian understandings of salvation with an alternative that encompasses all things in the redemptive work of Christ.[103] The passage Sittler builds upon, Colossians 1:15-20, reads:

> He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the first-born from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

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[102] White, 1205.

[103] Joseph Sittler, "Called to Unite," in *Evocations of Grace: Writings on Ecology, Theology, and Ethics*, ed. by Steven Bouma-Prediger & Peter Bakken (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 46.

By turning to this epistle's description of the cosmic work of Christ, Sittler and others have resisted anthropocentric and individualistic understandings of salvation. Instead, they widen the soteriological playing field to encompass all of creation, recovering the soteriological vision of the early church in the process.

Widening the circle of Christ's salvific work does not necessarily undermine human exceptionalism. For instance, when Christ's universal significance is tied to his human nature, anthropocentric assumptions are reinforced. Richard Bauckham traces anthropocentric developments of the cosmic significance of the incarnation through a number of early Christian authors and their anthropologies.[104] For example, Maximus the Confessor understood there to be five great divisions in reality—uncreated/created, intelligible/sensible, heaven/earth, paradise/inhabited world, and male/female. According to Maximus, the original human vocation was the unification of reality across these divides "as a kind of natural bond mediating between the universal poles through their proper parts, and leading into unity in itself those things that are naturally set apart from one another by a great interval."[105] Humanity's ontology placed human nature as a bridge between each division, but human beings failed to fulfill their reconciling vocation, abusing "the natural power of uniting what is divided…so as to separate what is united."[106] According to this understanding, the work of the incarnation was the fulfillment of the particularly human vocation of reconciliation, which was cosmic in scope.

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[104] Richard Bauckham, "The Incarnation and the Cosmic Christ," in *Incarnation: On the Scope and Depth of Christology*, Neils Henrik Gregersen, ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 38-39.

[105] Maximus, "Difficulty 41," in Andrew Louth, Maximus the Confessor (London: Routledge, 1996) 157.

[106] Maximus, "Difficutly 41," 158.

Bauckham demonstrates that other early theologians also understood salvation to be cosmic in scope, even if their interpretations of the incarnation continued to reinforce human exceptionalism. Gregory the Great and Bonaventura understood that Christ's ability to transfigure all of creation was based on the fact that, as a man, he shared something with every part of creation. Drawing from ancient philosophy these theologians viewed human beings as microcosms of the entire created order. They understood human beings as occupying a unique position capable of uniting all of creation because we share understanding with creatures that possess understanding, feeling with those that feel, life with those that live, and existence with everything else.[107] While this interpretation focuses on what human beings share with the rest of creation, it still supports notions of our paramount importance. This is somewhat ironic, since it is the sharing of existence with all things that exist that is finally necessary to include the entire cosmos in this recapitulation. As the "lowest common denominator" of the ontological hierarchy of creation, existence is also *sufficient* to guarantee an ontological solidarity with everything that exists, however anthropocentric valuations might order those things. Human beings need not possess understanding, feeling, or life to possess something in common with every other created being. Those distinctions instead represent ways that human beings have traditionally understood their ontological importance to be higher than all of the rest of creation.

Such anthropocentric interpretations are not the only way that theologians have understood the significance of the incarnation to be cosmic in scope. As noted above, Sittler based his understanding of the incarnation on the Christic hymn of Colossians.

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[107] Bauckham, 36-38.

This hymn connects Christ directly to all of creation, bypassing the ontological standing of human nature by claiming that *ta panta*, "all things," were created "in him…through him…and for him," and that he precedes all things, holds all things together, and reconciles all things. Sittler argues that this "six-times repeated *ta panta*" indicates that Christ is "not only the matrix and *prius* of all things; he is the intention, the fullness, and the integrity of all things."[108] Paul Haffner builds on this insight, arguing that the "through," "in," and "for" him of the passage portray Christ as the efficient, exemplary and final cause of all that is created.[109] In other words, Christ is the initial impulse, the ongoing shaper, and the final goal of all things. Human beings as such do not possess a special mediating position, that role is reserved for Christ alone. This approach uses christocentrism to undermine anthropocentrism, re-emphasizing the unique significance of the Incarnate One, rather than a unique ontology of human nature.

Recent work with the concept of "deep incarnation" represents another attempt to universalize understandings of the incarnation. Niels Henrik Gregersen develops his interpretation of deep incarnation by re-reading John 1:14 "And the Word became *sarx* (flesh) and lived among us" and 3:16 "For God so loved the *cosmos* (world), that he gave his only Son." Here, flesh is understood to represent more than the human body and the world to represent more than the planet Earth—they stand for the matrix of all created reality. By entering into that matrix, the Logos transforms all of creation including, but not limited to, human beings. The love that inspires the incarnation is not solely love for humanity—it is love for the entire cosmos. This interpretation undermines plausibility challenges based on the relative insignificance of humanity in the vast cosmos. No

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[108] Sittler, 39.

[109] Paul Haffner, *Towards a Theology of the Environment* (Herefordshire: Gracewing, 2008), 212.

particular importance needs to be attached to human nature to justify the incarnation. According to this view, the incarnation does not reach only to the level of humanity, but stretches to the depth of the material reality that the Logos entered in the incarnation. Gregersen further expands his interpretation of the work of the incarnation, arguing that Jesus' suffering on the cross encompasses all suffering—including evolutionary suffering.[110] The work of the incarnation is not primarily revelation requiring cognitive appropriation, but involves an embodied solidarity with all of material reality. Furthermore, because God is present in Jesus, this co-suffering effectively transforms earthly suffering, redeeming it.[111]

This present work builds on the ideas of deep incarnation, taking some of its primary insights as preliminary starting points. With Gregersen, I assume that the incarnation is not motivated solely by human need. Instead, I envision the work of the incarnation as cosmic in both its motivation and its effects. I further assumes that the experiences of all creatures are important to God, or as Ruth Page suggests, "that everything that happens in the natural world, including its suffering, and its mistreatment by humans, matters to God."[112] Despite these similarities, this work addresses one lacuna in the current literature by engaging the ecumenical councils in developing a cosmic understanding of the person and work of Christ. Recent work on the ecological implications of christology tends to neglect the traditional two-natures formulation of the doctrine of the incarnation. This work engages that formulation and finds within it resources for critiquing the anthropocentric distortions that have shaped its interpretation.

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[110] Niels Henrik Gregersen, "The Cross of Christ in an Evolutionary World," in *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 40:3 (2001), 193.
[111] "Cross of Christ," 204.
[112] Ruth Page, *God and the Web of Creation*, (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1996) 104

These reconstructions of the cosmic work of Christ provide a helpful corrective to overtly anthropocentric christological constructions by arguing that both the purpose and the effects of the incarnation move beyond the realm of the purely human to the entire cosmos. This approach further undermines anthropocentrism through its emphasis on the universal implications of the incarnation—the *ta panta*, *sarx*, and *cosmos* of the passages we have discussed. This universal scope erodes creaturely distinctions that contribute to anthropocentric worldviews. However, deep incarnation's extension of Christ's work to the entire cosmos leads to further questions about the purpose of that work. What does it mean to say that the incarnation reconciles all things or that Christ's suffering transforms all suffering? While it is environmentally helpful that deep incarnation and other interpretations of the Cosmic Christ have included the rest of creation in eschatological fulfillment, they have not yet adequately addressed what such redemption might mean for creatures that are other-than-human. The anthropocentric ideal of salvation as the maintenance of personal identity beyond death and its continuation into eternity seems absurd when extended to the whole of created reality. Objecting to the claim that everything will be transfigured in eternity, Holmes Rolston III asks, "Dust devils are transient; transfigured in Jesus, do they become immortal?"[113] What must be noticed here is that anthropocentric assumptions do not only distort interpretations of the incarnation, they affect doctrines such as eschatology and salvation as well. Although the Cosmic Christ holds that the incarnation impacts the entire created order, interpreters still need to do further work examining what the redemption or reconciliation of all things might actually mean. We will engage these issues further in Chapters 5 and 6.

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[113] Holmes Rolston III, "Divine Presence—Causal, Cybernetic, Caring, Cruciform" in *Incarnation: On the Scope and Depth of Christology*, 262.

Conclusion

Anthropocentric assumptions color theological interpretations of the incarnation. As we have seen, anthropocentric valuations of what makes a characteristic "great" have shaped traditional understandings of the divine attributes while linguistic hubris has generated an overconfidence in language's ability to precisely describe both divine and human natures. These distortions undergird challenges to the logical coherence of the doctrine of the incarnation. Anthropocentric prioritization of cognitive responses to revelation have distorted understandings of soteriology so that salvation becomes a matter of intellectual assent to certain propositions. This excludes the vast majority of created reality from the salvific work of the incarnation. This soteriological distortion leads to challenges to the plausibility of absolutist christologies that hold that the incarnation was uniquely and exhaustively effective for all of creation. Even ecotheological attempts to expand the soteriological horizon to include the entire cosmos trip over anthropocentric assumptions about the nature of salvation and the role of human nature in that salvation. The depth with which anthropocentrism is interwoven into all theological reflection indicates that any attempt to resist it will require a novel approach intentionally developed to resist anthropocentric distortions in theological thinking. It is to developing such an approach that we turn in the next chapter.

2

Decentering Theology

In the first chapter, we examined how anthropocentric biases have shaped both the development of two-natures christology and certain challenges to it. In this chapter, I will propose an interpretive strategy that is designed to resist these biases. First, I will examine different responses by theologians and biblical scholars to the distortions of anthropocentrism. Next, I argue that an effective interpretive strategy needs to bring multiple perspectives into dialogue in order to develop a more comprehensive theological vision. Then I turn to the field of biomimicry for insight into how human beings can borrow the "lenses" of other creatures to supplement our own theological understandings. Finally, I will propose using "ecomimetic interpretation" as a method for intentionally resisting anthropocentric biases in the examination of texts and traditions, and demonstrate this approach with a brief example.

Responses to "Centric" Thinking

As I explained in the introduction, subjective "centrism," whether it is egocentrism, anthropocentrism, or any other type, is inescapable, at least to some extent. However, some theologians who have otherwise worked to undermine the human exceptionalism that is used to validate ecologically harmful practices too readily concede that Christianity is, and will remain, *objectively* anthropocentric.[1] Distinguishing between subjective (perspectival and epistemological) and objective (ethical and teleological)

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[1] See David Horrell, *The Bible and the Environment: Toward a Critical Ecological Biblical Theology*, 130. See also Richard Bauckham's balancing of the claim that human beings must recognize ourselves as "participants in the community of God's creation," with his acceptance that "No doubt we are eminent participants" because "Jesus does say we are of more value than the birds." *The Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the Community of Creation* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2010) 75.

anthropocentrism allows the interpreter to both identify and resist anthropocentric biases that are otherwise nearly invisible and assumed to be inevitable. The fact that we human beings perceive the world from our own irreducible perspectives and process what we perceive through our culturally-conditioned epistemological frameworks should function as a reminder that our grasp of religious "truth" is partial, at best. This subjective anthropocentrism is not itself a moral failing, and recognition of it can be profoundly humbling. Acknowledging that our perspectives are limited can lead to a deepened encounter with the other: the meeting of the self with another whose interiority and perspective is finally separate from, and therefore in many ways inaccessible to, our own selves. By contrast, failing to recognize that we do not possess an unfiltered comprehension of reality diminishes the depth of our encounters with others when we assume either that their perceptions are identical with our own, or that they must be wrong insofar as they differ from our understandings. Unchallenged anthropocentrism is ethically and theologically problematic because it both supports the devaluation of other parts of God's good creation and leaves unexplored vast resources for theological insight that might come from taking more than human perspectives into theological account.

Nevertheless, the extent of our inevitable subjective anthropocentrism is easily overstated, and when left unchallenged it tends to reinforce objective anthropocentrism. While it is true that a human being cannot perceive the world from any perspective but that of a human being, it is also true that a white woman cannot perceive the world from any perspective but that of a white woman. This truth does not foreclose that limited perspective from being informed by perspectives other than the one possessed by that individual person. I can closely observe the interactions of different people (such as white

men or black women—along with any other group) with others while questioning my assumptions about whether my community generally treats people fairly. I can listen to others' accounts of their own experiences in order to gain a better understanding of how my perspective on questions of justice in my community is limited. I can use the information I have gained to imagine what would happen if I were in a different situation (i.e. how I might feel in or react to certain situations if I were similarly situated to these other people). These are tools actually employed in anti-racist discourse in the 21st century, and they demonstrate that perspectival or epistemological particularity does not exempt one from trying to understand the world from other perspectives as well.

To be sure, tools for resisting racial bias do not translate neatly to resistance of anthropocentric bias. Human beings can use language to communicate our perspectives to one another in an attempt to expand our understandings of society. Whatever communication there might be between human beings and other creatures, it will not have the same level of precision.[2] Furthermore, attempts to imaginatively adopt the perspective of a material body that is not human will lead to charges that one is engaged in anthropomorphism—charges that will be at least partially true. But anthropocentrism distorts charges of anthropomorphic projection by assuming that human experience is qualitatively different from that of all other material bodies. The assumption that other material bodies cannot suffer, or perceive, or think, or experience in manners comparable to that of human beings is used to justify the charge that attempting to empathize, think, or perceive with them is simply anthropomorphic projection. However, understanding the

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[2] I would note, however, that the ability of human language to negotiate perspectival limitations can be overstated. The meanings of the words we use are also conditioned by our lived experience, and the belief that shared language alone is enough to enable complete understanding of another's perspective is an example of the linguistic bias of anthropocentrism discussed in the previous chapter.

metaphorical character of human language provides a way to mitigate anthropomorphic projection and resist anthropocentric dismissal of the insights that might be gained from engaging with other perspectives. There are ways that a dog's happiness is similar to a human's, while there remain ways that they are different. In order to empathetically engage with other material bodies without colonizing their perspectives with human projections, one must avoid both the assumptions that human interpreters can have unmediated access to the perspective of another material body and that there cannot be any similarity between those perspectives.[3]

Resisting subjective anthropocentrism means just that—resisting it. It is not a claim that one will ever achieve the actual experience of seeing the world through someone else's eyes. It is, however, based on the belief that *attempts* to resist implicit biases bring us into closer communion with one another and supplement our own limited perspectives with the insights of others. Subjective anthropocentrism needs to be resisted because when it is not, it creates ethical and theological blind spots. For example, when our perceptions of reality emphasize our fear of death, we give greater ethical weight to that fear than to other experiences. Unexamined subjective anthropocentrism supports objectively anthropocentric valuations (e.g. placing an extremely high priority on the extension of life). Furthermore, subjective anthropocentrism ignores the theological resources present in the perspectives of all the material bodies that make up creation and are other-than-human. The perspectives of other material bodies like water molecules,

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[3] In the realm of animal research, Marc Bekoff explains the virtue of "biocentric anthropomorphism" that avoids these assumptions, arguing that "it stresses that there are important species and individual differences in behavior, cognitive capacities, and emotions, and that it is wrong and simplistic to claim that if animal joy is not like our joy then they do not have it." *Animal Passions and Beastly Virtues: Reflections on Redecorating Nature* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006), 151.

fruit trees, and sparrows might yield challenges to (and corrections of) human understandings of the divine.[4] Before turning to how we might take these other perspectives into account, we will examine three responses to anthropocentrism, and what each contributes to a strategic resistance of anthropocentric distortions.

1. *Theocentrism*

One response to this slide from subjective to objective anthropocentrism is the rejection of objective anthropocentrism by centering the moral universe on something other than the human. This is the impulse behind James Gustafson's theocentric ethics—the recognition that the cosmos is founded in and centered on the divine, rather than the human. The idea here runs along the same lines as David Clough's rejection of meta-ethical anthropocentrism (which holds that human beings are the only source of ethical value) as contrary to Christian claims that God is the source of all value and goodness. Gustafson draws from the Reformed tradition for the key to this theocentric position, affirming that, "the chief end of man is to glorify God, to relate to all things in a manner appropriate to their relations to God, in recognition of the dependence of all things upon him, and in gratitude for all things."[5] As Gustafson argues, this view relativizes human happiness among the many concerns that might be involved in God's "ends." He proposes a humbler position for human theologians, arguing that "the benevolence that we know and experience does not warrant the confidence that God's purposes are the fulfillment of my own best interests as I conceive them."[6] Recognizing that God's

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[4] They might not, but we will never know if we do not make the attempt to take those perspectives seriously.

[5] James M. Gustafson, *Theology and Ethics*, vol, 1 of *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981) 184.

[6] Gustafson, *Theology and Ethics*, 202.

purposes include all of creation, rather than focusing solely on human destiny, can reshape the ethical questions from, "What is good for man? Or What is of value to human beings?" to "What is good for the whole creation? What is good not only for man but for the natural world of which man is part?"[7] This approach acknowledges that the theological tradition has tended towards anthropocentrism and that this tendency is problematic.

However, this claim that theology and ethics should be theocentric is far from the radical corrective that I am arguing the tradition needs. To a certain extent, Gustafson's theocentric approach simply reiterates the fundamental Christian prohibition against idolatry: nothing created—including human beings—should take the place of God. Gustafson identifies the distortion that anthropocentrism has introduced, observing that, "Religion and God have been put in the service of human needs. Theology continues to assure human beings that the Deity serves to fulfill particular human desires."[8] This amounts to "a denial of God as God—as the power and ordering of life in nature and history which sustains and limits human activity, which 'demands' recognition of principles and boundaries of activities for the sake of man and of the whole of life."[9] Few, if any, traditional theologians would disagree with Gustafson's conclusion that, "God does not exist simply for the service of man; man exists for the service of God."[10] The problem is not that they overtly claim that God exists to serve humanity, but that subjective anthropocentrism distorts theological reflection to *function* as though God did.

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[7] Gustafson, *Theology and Ethics*, 88.
[8] Gustafson, *Theology and Ethics*, 83.
[9] Gustafson, *Theology and Ethics*, 84.
[10] Gustafson, *Theology and Ethics*, 342.

Gustafson acknowledges the limitations of subjective anthropocentrism, and accepts them as inevitable. He observes that human perspectives have certain blind spots, but continues to hold up human experience as the primary source for theological reflection. Although Gustafson urges theocentrism as the appropriate Christian position, he is quite clear that he is not proposing *subjective* theocentrism: "I clearly do not mean that I can view the world from God's perspective, that my theological construing of the world is the way in which God construes the world."[11] Although Gustafson understands the theological and ethical tasks to begin with discerning what God is doing in the world, he points out that human beings cannot know God's purposes with certainty[12] The epistemic limitations of subjective anthropocentrism are accepted, and Gustafson argues that this limitation means that "the divine ordering is discovered in the processes of human experience."[13] The problem with this acceptance of subjective anthropocentrism can be seen in his development of theocentric approaches to particular ethical questions in the second volume of *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective*. Rather than shifting ethical discourse from what is good for human beings to what is good for the whole of creation, Gustafson tackles issues that are central to human moral discourse, but largely irrelevant to the rest of creation, including "Marriage and Family," "Suicide," "Biomedical Research Funding," and "Population and Nutrition."[14] Although this volume was published before climate change took center stage in public environmental discourse, it pays scant attention to the loss of biodiversity, erosion, pollution, and other

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[11] Gustafson, *Theology and Ethics,* 3.
[12] Gustafson, *Volume One*, 244.
[13] Gustafson, *Volume One*, 245.
[14] Gustafson, *Ethics and Theology,* vol, 2 of *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984).

environmental problems that have been exacerbated by anthropocentric ethical approaches. In his discussion of population and nutrition, Gustafson urges human beings to take into consideration whether damage to the ecosphere endangers the conditions for sustaining life in the future, but his caveat is vague at best: "warnings about long-range effects on nature of some possible innovations in food production…are signals of the necessity to remain within *some limits* of ordering of life in the world."[15] However, he grants no moral standing to plant life, and seems to consider the loss of topsoil morally problematic only because it impacts the ability of human beings to feed themselves.[16] It seems that even a firm commitment to a theocentric affirmation that God's ordering is not necessarily for the benefit of human beings alone is insufficient to provide the grounds for considering other members of creation as ends unto themselves.

At its most basic, theocentrism is the avowed position of Christianity, which affirms that God is the Creator and Sustainer of all that is. It provides the logic behind stewardship models of the human-world relationship that allege that human beings should take responsibility for the care of the earth because God's care extends to all of creation.[17] The anthropocentric distortions that we have examined do not arise because theologians positively assert that human beings are the center of reality and that God exists to serve them, but rather because unexamined anthropocentric assumptions allow human beings to marginalize other material bodies in their ethical and theological

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[15] Gustafson, *Ethics and Theology*, 243 (emphasis added).
[16] Gustafson, *Ethics and Theology*, 243.
[17] See Willis Jenkins, *Ecologies of Grace: Environmental Ethics and Christian Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008) 77-92; Michael S. Northcott, *The Environment and Christian Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 129-130; Tim Cooper, *Green Christianity: Caring for the Whole of Creation* (London: Spire, 1990) 53-57. For engagement with the virtues and shortcomings of this approach, see R.J. Berry, ed., *Environmental Stewardship: Critical Perspectives—Past and Present* (New York: T & T Clark International, 2006).

thinking. Without tackling the implicit biases of subjective anthropocentrism, a claim to be pursuing a theocentric worldview seems unable to correct the distortions that have crept into our moral traditions.

2. *Expanding the Circle of Concern*

The more common response to "centric thinking" consists of expanding the "circle" of concern, rather than removing the human from its center. Male egocentrism is countered by expanding the circle of respect to include one's fellow man, androcentrism by expanding the circle of care to all of humanity, anthropocentrism by expanding the circle of sympathy to all life that shares in the experience of suffering, sentiocentrism by expanding the circle of respect to all living beings without distinction. As noble as these efforts are, they do not address the issue of centrism at all—these circles of concern remain centered on the individual human being, radiating outwards to more distant levels of concern. Like the human-as-microcosm arguments examined in the previous chapter, these efforts tie inclusion into the world of ethical concern to a certain characteristic shared with the central human being, whether that characteristic is life, sentience, humanity, or something else. They do not focus on the alterity of the other, and they are not fully open to the novelty and insight that such alterity brings. Objective anthropocentrism values all human beings insofar as they share a certain rationality, sentiocentrism values all feeling creatures insofar as they share in the experience of suffering, and biocentrism values all creatures insofar as they share those characteristics of growth and reproduction that are symptomatic of life. While this expansion extends moral concern to other beings, it retains an anthropocentric marginalization of the ways in which other creatures are truly other than human.

This approach of expanding the circle of concern beyond the merely human funds animal rights discourse.[18] According to those using this approach, the suffering of creatures that are not human is an issue of ethical concern. This argument is then used to justify various forms of vegetarianism over diets that include meat or other animal products because such omnivorous diets entail the suffering and/or death of other animals.[19] Ryan Patrick McLaughlin applauds these efforts to "expand the circle of direct moral concern to include nonhuman animals," and proposes that that circle should be expanded even further to include plants: "the inevitable thrust of the theological foundations for cosmocentric transfiguration…suggests the best dietary approximation of the kingdom is neither vegetarianism nor veganism. It is rather fruitarianism."[20] Expanding the circle of concern in this way is an admirable effort to resist objective anthropocentrism that would exclude plants and other animals from human ethical consideration.

These theologians are resisting the objective anthropocentrism that would exclude other material bodies from ethical and theological concern. Like Gustafson's theocentric approach, however, they fall short insofar as they fail to resist the subjective anthropocentrism that leads to the distortions they are resisting. This can be seen in two areas: their failure to critique the anthropocentrism of ethical valuations that focus on human preoccupations with suffering and death, and the related disregard of those parts of creation most unlike human beings, such as rocks, dirt, and other inanimate members of creation.

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[18] See Andrew Linzy's *Animal Theology* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994).
[19] Linzy, 125-137.
[20] Ryan Patrick McLaughlin, *Preservation and Protest: Theological Foundations for an Eco-Eschatological Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014) 397.

First, expanding the circle of concern finds no grounds to challenge human ethical hierarchies such as those that prioritize the extension of life over other concerns, or theological preoccupation with purely human concerns like guilt and forgiveness. Despite McLaughlin's radical expansion of the circle of ethical concern, he fails to challenge the centrality that anthropocentrism places on the extension of life, explaining that,

> I would not strive to protect the freedom of speech for a cockroach. Neither world I do so for a human in a catatonic state. I would not strive for a tree's escape from pruning on account of its suffering. But I *would* strive to protect the life of the cockroach, the comatose patient, and the tree.[21]

I am not arguing that extension of life could not be an important value for each of these entities. Rather I am suggesting that expanding the circle does not make room for taking the values that these other material bodies might prioritize from their individual perspectives into account. By assuming that certain human concerns are the concerns of all living creatures, this approach exacerbates a problem in the "do unto others as you would have them do unto you" rule for ethical living. Treating others the way that you want to be treated is a good thing, *if* they want the same kind of treatment that you want. However, it can be a very bad thing if what they want is something radically different from what you want. If you think it would be incredibly romantic to be pursued relentlessly and have a person who loves you always just outside your door, and you inflict this behavior on someone who does not share your view, you would be a stalker, not a morally-evolved human being.[22] Ethical discernment requires the effort of moving

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[21] McLaughlin, 397.

[22] I have watched this play out in cross-species relationships for the past three years, as my vegetarian neighbor extended radical hospitality to animals inhabiting our neighborhood. She put out food for birds, squirrels, chipmunks (and rats), as well as feral cats. However, when her own cat hunted in the backyard, she punished him for being "so bad." Vegetarianism may be an ethical stance for a human being, but it cannot be ethically imposed on a carnivore like a cat.

outside of our own egocentric perspectives in order to understand the treatment that another desires, and navigating the differences between their desires and our own. Otherwise, we are simply imposing our own desires on others, and patting ourselves on the back for doing so.

The second shortcoming of this approach is closely related to the first. As far as we know, inanimate material bodies neither suffer nor die. Because anthropocentric moral thinking is preoccupied with suffering and death, it lacks the resources for extending ethical reflection to interactions with inanimate material bodies. The depth to which our perspectival anthropocentrism affects ethical and theological understandings can be seen in the response that most people would have to the question, "What is the proper moral treatment owed to a stone?" Given the dominant frameworks of Western moral and religious thought, this question seems absurd. A stone cannot communicate, reason, move, feel, grow, or reproduce like human beings do. Because moral obligations are negotiated entirely within human frames of reference, the question of what obligation might be owed to a material body so radically not human simply does not compute. Some Christian theologians have tried to push against this disregard for the inanimate by turning to the metaphorical or panentheistic understanding of the world as God's body.[23] Paganism similarly challenges the disregard with which monotheistic religions treat the inanimate world by arguing that nothing is truly non-living. Process theology has pushed in this direction as well, arguing that all actual entities—whether organic or not—possess

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[23] See Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: an Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993) and Grace Jantzen, *God's World, God's Body* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), for further development of this approach.

both a conceptual pole and a physical pole.[24] The father of Process philosophy, A. N. Whitehead observed that "there is no absolute gap between 'living' and 'non-living' societies."[25] Nevertheless, this approach still marginalizes inanimate bodies as having miniscule amounts of potential—while they are on the continuum with humans and angels, they are so quantitatively different that it almost amounts to a qualitative divide. Although these approaches provide pockets of resistance to anthropocentrism, they do little to transform the dominant tradition's disregard for the inanimate bodies with which we share this universe.

For most people, these shortcomings do not count for much. Anthropocentric valuation denies the possibility of inherent dignity to inanimate beings, and devalues any concern God might have for such bodies almost entirely. Inanimate members of creation are entitled to moral consideration only insofar as they are necessary for the support and flourishing of animate beings. Air, water, or soil might be worthy of protection, but only because of the value that humans place on clean air, water, and soil. It is difficult to conceive of how human beings might consider our moral responsibilities to creatures so different from us for the very reason that they do not seem to want the things that we want, or, as far as we can perceive, want anything at all. It is not my purpose to propose that stones be accorded the same rights and privileges afforded to human beings. It would be absurd to give stones the right to vote, and impossible for human beings to respect the bodily autonomy of all inanimate bodies and still survive: we must breathe, eat, and drink in order to live. Furthermore, we have no reason to believe that our breathing and

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[24] Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (Corrected Edition) (New York: The Free Press, 1978) 108.
[25] Whitehead, 102.

drinking offends against other material bodies in the transformations that they undergo. Instead, I am arguing that our inability to even conceive of moral discourse that does not focus on autonomy, suffering, and avoidance of death indicates a shortcoming in anthropocentric thinking that might be corrected by resisting the tendency to confuse our subjective anthropocentric perspectives with the objective ordering of the cosmos. In addition to enlarging the capacity of human moral thinking, stepping outside of the expanding circles of concern has the potential to reveal theological insights that are inaccessible from an anthropocentric perspective.

Simply expanding the circle of concern does not provide the foundation for such an exploration. In order to do this, ethical opposition to objective anthropocentrism needs to be accompanied by a methodological innovation that challenges subjective anthropocentrism and opens a way for interpretation to be informed by perspectives from material beings that are other than human. Norman Habel and a group of other scholars have undertaken this task first through their work with the Earth Bible Team (EBT), and more recently with the SBL Consultation for Ecological Hermeneutics.[26]

3. *Engaging in Dialogue: The Principle of Voice*

In their first volume, *Readings from the Perspective of Earth*, Habel and the EBT introduce their approach as a reorientation of biblical interpretation. Following a feminist hermeneutic of suspicion, Habel describes their preliminary assumptions about biblical texts:

> Just as feminists have adopted an approach of reading the Bible primarily as a collection of texts with an androcentric and patriarchal orientation, so we would

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[26] See Norman C. Habel, ed., *Readings from the Perspective of Earth* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2000) and Norman C. Habel & Peter Trudinger, eds., *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008).

> suspect that the Bible, being written by humans and for humans, would be not only patriarchal and androcentric but also anthropocentric.[27]

In order to counteract this implicit bias, the EBT developed an ecojustice approach that builds upon the feminist hermeneutic of suspicion and retrieval—suspicion that the texts are distorted by anthropocentric interests and retrieval of the voice of Earth that has been systematically distorted by this anthropocentrism.[28] As described at the onset of the project, this hermeneutical approach involves two key features: identification with the Earth or Earth community and reading with a declared consciousness of ecojustice.[29] This "declared consciousness" can be seen in their adoption of six ecojustice principles and the use by each interpreter of one or more of those principles in connection with their reading of a given text.[30] This approach resists objective anthropocentrism by using the ecojustice principles to resist anthropocentric devaluation of Earth. The EBT also resists subjective anthropocentrism by repositioning the interpreter. As Habel describes their approach, "Rather than reflecting *about* the Earth as we analyse a text, we are seeking to reflect *with* Earth and see things from the perspective of Earth."[31] This requires the interpreters to read as part of the Earth community, as "fellow members…kin, relatives within the Earth community."[32] An important component of this repositioning involves

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[27] Habel, "Introducing the Earth Bible," in *Readings from the Perspective of Earth*, 36.

[28] In this discussion (but not elsewhere in my work), I have adopted the EBT's practice of capitalizing "Earth." They do so in order to emphasize that the Earth community is a subject in its own right, and not merely an object of interest to human beings. My reason for not following this practice elsewhere will be discussed below.

[29] Habel, "Introducing the Earth Bible," 34.

[30] Found in each of the EBT's works, these principles are: "1. The Principle of Intrinsic Worth…2. The Principle of Interconnectedness…3. The Principle of Voice…4. The Principle of Purpose….5. The Principle of Mutual Custodianship…6. The Principle of Resistance." See *Readings from the Perspective of Earth*, 24.

[31] Habel, "Introducing the Earth Bible," 34.

[32] Habel, "Introducing the Earth Bible," 34.

seeing the Earth as a subject with its own voice, rather than the setting of human action or a topic treated by the Bible.

The approach of the EBT provides insight into how one can resist both objective and subjective anthropocentric distortions. They recognize that the interpreter needs to be repositioned if she is to hear anything other than reaffirmations of human centrality in the universe. Drawing contributors from many disciplines around the world, the EBT did not prescribe a particular method for interpretation. This provided space for a multitude of interpretive methods to be used, and their results examined. By not assuming that the texts were inherently positive or ecologically helpful, the EBT also encouraged honest engagement with what the texts say, which sometimes led to the rejection of the ostensible meaning of the text while clearing room for creative re-appropriation of the voice of Earth in other texts. However, the EBT identified one significant problem with their approach: frequently it failed to lead to sustained engagement with the overt anthropocentrism of the text, despite that being one of the stated goals of the project! As the EBT editorial team named the problem in the fifth volume of *The Earth Story* series,

> Even after exploring the social, religious and cultural context of a passage, there is a general reluctance on the part of many writers to discern those components of the text in context that are forcefully anthropocentric, embrace injustice towards Earth, devalue creation or depict God as actively destroying components of the Earth.[33]

In light of this difficulty, the later SBL Consultation modified the EBT approach of suspicion and retrieval to include an intermediate step of "identification." Habel notes, "In light of my experience as an editor and writer in the Earth Bible project, it has become clear to me that the activity of identification now deserves to be highlighted as a

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[33] The Earth Bible Team, "Ecojustice Hermeneutics: Reflections and Challenges," in *The Earth Story in the New Testament*, ed. by Norman C. Habel & Vicky Balabanski (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2002), 2.

distinct step in the hermeneutical process."[34] Because human interpreters tend to identify with human characters in texts, ecological interpreters must self-consciously identify with and as part of the Earth community.

While this amendment is helpful, I suggest that the problem lies in part with the neglect of *particular* members of the Earth community entailed by the attempt to read with the Earth as a whole. While Habel, et al., express an awareness that anthropocentrism distorts not only the biblical texts, but modern contexts and interpreters as well, they underestimate the insidiousness of anthropocentric distortions. Adopting a self-conscious solidarity with the Earth does not seem to be sufficient grounds for critiquing anthropocentrism—either in the text or in the interpreter. This shortcoming stems from the fact that attempts to read with the "Earth" as a whole marginalize the radical diversity of material bodies that make up the cosmos. The ecojustice principle of voice claims that, "Earth is a subject capable of raising its own voice in celebration and against injustice."[35] Positively, this principle recognizes that the Earth has its own story to tell, its own joy, and its own lament. It implies that the failure to hear the Earth's voice is not reflective of its actual silence, but rather a failure on the part of human beings who perceive the world as voiceless and uncommunicative. Habel, et al., strive to speak for the Earth, to make its voice heard in the realm of human discourse. Unfortunately, by treating the voices of the earth as if they were one, this principle often compounds the first erasure.[36] The earth is made up of many material bodies, and they do not all speak

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[34] Habel, "Introducing Ecological Hermeneutics," in *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics*, 4.

[35] "Six Ecojustice Principles" in *Readings from the Perspective of Earth*, 24.

[36] Although the EBT expressed dismay over the failure of their authors to seriously engage the anthropocentrism in many texts, they did note the clear exception of Anne Elvey's contribution on Luke 12:13-34. Interestingly, Elvey implicitly adopts an ecomimetic interpretative lens, contrasting the "storing" function of compost (a particular part of the Earth community, rather than the Earth community as a whole) with the storehouse of the rich man. See "Ecojustice Hermeneutics: Reflections and Challenges" and

with one voice.[37] The story of the predator is different from the story of the prey. The voices of the sea creatures do not all sing one song. The celebrations of the fungus arise from the dying laments of the creatures it feeds upon. To speak of the voice of the Earth as though it were one erases the unique voices of the billions of creatures that make up the earth. It deprives them of the integrity of their own perspectives, their unique praises and protests.

When we speak of the earth, nature, the non-human, the other-than-human, and even the more-than-human as one group, we fail to encounter the raven, the ocean, and the oak tree in the fullness of their own selves. We sweep them into one category and whatever name we apply to that category its single unifying characteristic is that *it is not us*. It remains the categorically other, voiceless and waiting for us to supply it with its story. Such categorization allows us to colonize the other, to play ventriloquists speaking our wishes as though they were the universal longing of all of creation.[38] We lose sight of the fact that the world has many voices, and they do not all speak as one. Attempting to speak for the entire earth community with one voice often leads to such an extension of human perspectives to the rest of the earth community, rather than actually listening to other perspectives.

"Storing Up Death, Storing Up Life" in *The Earth Story in the New Testament*, Norman C. Habel & Vicky Balabanski, eds. (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 2 & 107. For another example of (implicit) ecomimetic interpretation, see Balabanski's engagement with the Rocky Mountain locust in her contribution to *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics*, "Critiquing Anthropocentric Cosmology: Retrieving a Stoic 'Permeation Cosmology' in Colossians 1:15-20." For an example of an EBT reading that treats the Earth's voice as singular (and fails to critique overt anthropocentrism in the text), see Adrian Leske's "Human Anxiety and the Natural World" in *The Earth Story and the New Testament*.

[37] This is why I do not follow the EBT's practice of referring to "Earth" as a subject—because doing so renders the subjecthood of the millions of material bodies that make up the earth community imperceptible.

[38] This practice of colonizing the silenced other is not limited to beings that are other-than-human. Womanist theologian Emilie M. Townes describes a similar practice in her discussion of the construction of the black female identity of Aunt Jemima in *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 36-55.

This examination of the practice of reading with the Earth indicates that in order to effectively resist anthropocentric distortions, an interpretive approach will need to pay attention to the different perspectives that make up the earth community, rather than treat them as if they were all the same. In the next section, I will develop a metaphorical alternative to the principle of voice in order to offer a strategy for taking other-than-human perspectives into account in theological interpretation.

Multiple Lenses

The ecojustice principles adopted by the EBT recognize that material bodies other than human beings are capable of having and expressing their own perspectives on reality. These perspectives are other than, and possibly in contradiction to, those of human beings. If we do not simply assume that they are valueless or wrong, we are still left with the problem of how to hear, understand, and translate these perspectives in ways that enable them to be brought into dialogue with human perspectives. In order to tackle this dilemma, we will examine how theologians learned to account for variety and difference among human experiences, before turning to how this might be applied to the world experienced by material beings that are other-than-human.

Distortions in Christian theology and hermeneutics that are similar to those of anthropocentrism have been exposed by liberation scholars working from feminist, black, womanist, and Latin American perspectives (among many others). What these scholars have demonstrated is that different aspects of theology are emphasized and others marginalized when the questions are approached from different perspectives. While those suffering under conditions of imperial oppression have emphasized the biblical themes of liberation and care for the poor and oppressed, they have de-emphasized the tradition's

tendency to focus on relief from guilt or existential anxiety.[39] While some dismiss such deviation from dominant tradition as being outside of Christian orthodoxy, most responsible theologians realize that these critiques come from valid perspectives that have not always received the consideration they deserve. Taking these perspectives into account when doing theology does not require abandoning the tradition and replacing it with the insights of one or another liberation theology. What it does require is listening to these perspectives empathetically and allowing them to challenge one's own claims. It requires dialogue, not surrender. One need not agree with Delores Williams that "There is nothing divine in the blood of the cross" in order to appreciate her argument that glorification of the cross has been used to justify black women's suffering and exploitation.[40]

A key component in my method for fostering dialogue (and reconstructing theological claims in response to such dialogue) is recognizing that every individual's irreducible particularity functions analogously to optical lenses. Such lenses allow the vision to focus on certain things, while making other objects imperceptible. There is no lens that allows the eye to simultaneously perceive microscopic entities such as bacteria and distant objects like other planets, nor is anyone deceived into thinking they can objectively perceive both at the same time. Reading glasses bring printed words close to the eye into focus, while making it difficult to accurately perceive objects far away. This is not a failure in the lenses but a function of the multiplicity of the phenomenal world, in

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[39] Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, trans. by Paul Burns, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1987), 35-49; Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological View*, trans. by Paul Burns and Francis McDonagh, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993), 11-12.

[40] Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993) 167. Indeed, one of Williams' own students, JoAnne Marie Terrell, takes up this very issue in *Power in the Blood? The Cross in African American Experience* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1998).

which objects of different sizes are located at different distances from one another. We intuitively realize that our visual perspectives cannot take in all of reality at one time.

Our theological perspectives are similarly limited. Different understandings of God as the source and guarantor of a certain socio-cultural regime or as the liberator that comes to overturn that regime have as much to do with the social location of the interpreter as with the tradition itself. The perspective from which we interpret Christian scripture and tradition focuses our perception on certain things while rendering us functionally blind to others. No set of "lenses" allows for an objective view of theological reality. However, if we gather the views from multiple perspectives together, we may begin to correct some of the distortions in each. So long as Christian theology only takes the view through human lenses into account, it will reinforce rather than critique the anthropocentric distortions inherent in those lenses.

These are the hermeneutical insights that liberation theologians, writing from socio-cultural locations that have often been ignored, have brought to the tradition. My proposal seeks to expand these insights beyond merely human perspectives to include corrections from the perspectives of beings that are other-than-human.

Biomimetic Problem-Solving

Theology does not need to construct a method for entering into these foreign perspectives from scratch. Scientists and engineers engaged in such diverse fields as agriculture, building design, energy production, and high-speed transportation have recently adopted a biomimetic perspective in order to learn from the more-than-human world. In this section, I will explore this growing field, and the skills and knowledge that

make up its tools of the trade, in order to discover the foundations of a method for expanding theological discourse.

At its most basic, biomimicry means the imitation of life. Janine Benyus, co-founder of the Biomimicry Institute and Biomimicry 3.8, defines biomimicry as "the conscious emulation of life's genius," and describes the process as exploring "nature's masterpieces—photosynthesis, self-assembly, natural selection, self-sustaining ecosystems, eyes and ears and skin and shells, talking neurons, natural medicines, and more—and then copying these designs and manufacturing processes to solve our own problems."[41] From our first shaping of weapons that emulated the teeth, tusks, and claws of our more formidable fellow creatures to current research on using solar energy through processes based on photosynthesis, human beings have found sophisticated and efficient solutions to our problems in the tools, patterns, and processes that have emerged through natural processes. For as long as we have made things, human beings have been deriving inspiration for our technological innovations from the elegance of nature. With insights from an evolutionary perspective, modern biomimics recognize that the entire history of human innovation is nothing compared to eons of natural selection that have shaped the world we inhabit. As Benyus explains,

> If the age of the Earth were a calendar year and today were a breath before midnight on New Year's Eve, we showed up a scant fifteen minutes ago, and all of recorded history has blinked by in the last sixty seconds. Luckily for us, our planet-mates—the fantastic meshwork of plants, animals, and microbes—have been patiently perfecting their wares since March, an incredible 3.8 billion years since the first bacteria.[42]

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[41] Janine Benyus, *Biomimicry: Innovation Inspired By Nature* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1997) 2.
[42] Benyus, 2.

The designs we find in the world around us are the products of wisdom accumulated over eons of natural selection. The average algae found in the humblest pond scum is four times more efficient at gathering solar energy than the best silicone-based solar cell human beings can produce. Scientists have taken notice of the efficiency of nature and are turning to the mundane organisms that surround us to learn more about the processes that run this living planet.

This is not something entirely new. The Baconian scientific revolution (as well as the ensuing industrial revolution) were based on the idea that "nature" possessed a great deal of valuable information hidden from human beings. However, Bacon also assumed that the natural world was something more akin to a machine than a living thing, and that it therefore had no ethical standing that would prevent human manipulation of it for strictly human ends.[43] This shaped the scientific method according to the metaphor of "interrogation," in the fullest inquisitorial sense. Torture and maiming were acceptable tools for learning how non-human creatures did what they did. This view of the natural world as a machine also contributed to the mythic understanding of scientists as objective/impartial observers: human beings were detached from nature, its masters and interrogators. Over the years, scientists and ethicists have tempered this approach by recognizing that sentient creatures can have ethical standing and that there may be limits to what techniques can be justified in scientific inquiry. The modern biomimicry movement goes further, challenging the fundamental tenet that scientists can be objective observers, standing aloof from the objects of their measurements, records, and

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[43] Donald Worster, *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas, Second Edition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) 30; see also Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1980) 164-190.

hypotheses. Biomimics recognize "nature" as not only a source of hidden knowledge, but also as the teacher who imparts this wisdom to the student, and the judge who evaluates our attempts to emulate nature's genius.[44]

Wes Jackson's work with the Land Institute provides a paradigmatic example of this biomimetic approach. Jackson and his colleagues have been studying America's native prairies for over thirty-five years as they try to answer the question of how we are to feed our ever-growing population.[45] The anthropocentric problem they face is that conventional farming devastated the Midwest plains by tearing up the native sod, exposing soil that took ages to create to the eroding effects of wind and water. The loss of topsoil that ensued has led to the diminishment of the land's ability to sustain a variety of life forms. This was dramatically displayed in the Dust Bowl of the 1930s:

> On April 14 [1934] a vast black blizzard of earth came rolling out of the north toward Texas; it whirled and spun in a giant bowl, darkening the sun and covering the land with drifts up to twenty feet high. Less than a month later, on May 10, another great storm moved east toward Chicago, dumping twelve million tons of plains dirt on that city alone. Two days later the storm reached the eastern seaboard. Dust sifted into the White House and fell on ships standing out at sea.[46]

Although natural processes of drought and wind are often blamed for this devastation, neither the wind nor the shortage of precipitation in 1934 was novel. As Worster explains,

> It was man's destruction of the grassland that set the dirt free to blow. Through such ill-advised practices as plowing long straight furrows (often parallel to the wind), leaving large fields bare of all vegetation, replacing a more diverse plant life with a single cash crop, and—most importantly—destroying a native sod that was an indispensable buffer against wind and drought, the farmers themselves

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[44] Benyus explains biomimicry as the use of nature as model, measure, and mentor, which encourages using an "ecological standard to judge the 'rightness' of our innovations" and shifting our inquiry away from "what we can *extract* from the natural world" to "what we can *learn* from it." See front material.
[45] The Land Institute, "The Land Institute: Transforming Agriculture, Perenially," The Land Institute, https://landinstitute.org/; and Benyus, 20-36.
[46] Worster, 221.

unwittingly brought about most of the poverty and discouragement they suffered.[47]

The American prairies were a biotic amalgam that took ages to evolve and provided a host of ecosystem services including drought resistance, erosion prevention, and pest control. They were capable of sustaining the thousands of species that depended on them, at least until the arrival of human beings armed with steel plows. When the sod was removed and perennial polycultures were replaced by annual monocultures, conventional farming exposed the soil to the devastating effects of wind and water while allowing pest populations to become chronic problems. This then necessitated the application of chemical pesticides and fertilizers to replace the ecosystem services once provided by native polycultures. Benyus reports that "Since 1945, pesticide use has risen 3,300 per cent, but overall crop loss to pests has not gone down. In fact, despite our pounding the United States with 2.2 billion pounds of pesticides annually, crop losses have *increased* 20 percent."[48] Furthermore, to counteract lost fertility due to poor farming practices, "Our answer has been to rocket-boost fertility with 20 million tons of anhydrous ammonium fertilizer a year—as many as 160 pounds per person in this country alone."[49] All of this further depletes the natural fertility of the soil while allowing toxic chemicals to enter the groundwater of farming communities. America's breadbasket requires unsustainable inputs from petrochemical companies, and Jackson, et al., are seeking ways to bring our agricultural practices into harmony with the natural functioning of the local ecosystem.

In the 1970s, Jackson and his family moved to Kansas and founded The Land Institute, dedicated to "an agriculture that will save soil from being lost or poisoned while

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[47] Worster, 226.
[48] Benyus, 18.
[49] Benyus, 18.

promoting a community of life at once prosperous and enduring."[50] The acreage of The Land Institute includes The Wauhob, a prairie that never experienced the disturbance of sodbusting and retains the full functionality of a perennial polyculture ecological community.[51] The Wauhob serves as a kind of tutorial on what makes a thriving community as researchers count and catalog the different plants that coexist in patches of the prairie: "the nitrogen fixers, the deep-rooted ones that dig for water, the shallow-rooted ones that make the most of a gentle rain, the ones that grow quickly in the spring to shade out weeds, the ones that resist pests or harbor heroes such as beneficial insects."[52] In order to learn how polycultures of native perennials prevent devastating pest and disease outbreaks while suppressing weeds and stopping erosion altogether, Jackson's team has had to set aside their anthropocentric lenses in order to study the prairie from the perspectives of grasses, legumes, insects, soil microbes, water, and wind, as well as from the perspective of human scientists. They observe how these different species interact with other material bodies in their communities. They note how the modification or removal of any part of an ecological system affects the functioning of that system and the other members of it. Because they have brought anthropocentric perspectives into conversation with legume-centric, grass-centric, and insect-centric perspectives, the Land Institute team has come to recognize that in order to develop a perennial prairie capable of supporting human beings they may have to include plants that do nothing to directly benefit human beings. In experiments attempting to reconstruct the prairie using functionally equivalent but agriculturally valuable substitute species,

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[50] See the Land Institute "Mission Statement," https://landinstitute.org/about-us/vision-mission/.

[51] Benyus, 22-23.

[52] Benyus, 23.

researchers engage in successive plantings, giving different mixtures of species several growing seasons to establish themselves. Those that take root become part of the reconstructed prairies, while those that fail to germinate are replaced with other functional equivalents, and "If a few…noncrop species are present in the mix, so be it. 'If a plant is consistently present, it probably plays a role in maintaining stability.'"[53]

Because they are examining biotic communities from a variety of perspectives, biomimetic approaches like that of the Land Institute give ecologically-sensitive theologians insight into what we need in order to empathetically engage foreign perspectives. First, we need to make use of the best information we have about those material bodies whose perspectives we might try to inhabit. Wes Jackson did not start his project from an uninformed position—he had a B.A. in biology, a M.A. in botany, and a Ph.D. in genetics, and had chaired the environmental studies department at California State University, Sacramento before moving back to Kansas to start the Land Institute. Land Institute researchers are experts in the biological sciences, including botany and genetics, with access to all of the available information on the different species that they are studying. Biomimicry does not mean ignoring the insights we have gained through years of scientific investigation—it is firmly rooted in the concrete realm of scientific observation.

The second tool necessary for investigating reality from a foreign perspective is the ability to identify such a perspective accurately. This grows from the first tool— actual knowledge about the material body in question. One of the greatest weaknesses in ecotheology is that it is often undertaken by people of good will who are concerned for

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[53] Benyus, 32, quoting former Land Institute Research Associate Jon Piper.

the environment but woefully undereducated in the environmental sciences. While you might care for the "prairies," if the only perspective you can think of that needs to be taken into consideration is that of "plants," then you need to do some more research. The more that you learn, the more you recognize that the needs and functions of different species vary widely—each species possesses a different perspective, and quite possibly even different members of the same species possess different perspectives depending on their location and the make-up of their particular communities. As discussed earlier, anthropocentrism tends to treat everything that is not human as though it possesses one uniform perspective. Biomimicry recognizes the falseness of this assumption.

Finally, biomimicry uses the tool of empathetic imagination—the ability to reconstruct the experience of another creature and to use that reconstruction to gain insight into its needs and wants. One example of how biomimetic thinking can challenge anthropocentric assumptions can be seen in the practice of companion planting. When designing a perennial polyculture prairie, researchers must consider competition between plants. From an anthropocentric perspective, this would seem to mean that two plants with similar requirements should not be placed near one another. However, from a plant's perspective, root depth can be a more important consideration than horizontal distance between plants. Two plants that both need water can grow non-competitively side-by-side if they have different root depths: one shallow-rooted that makes use of light rains and the other deep-rooted and pulling water up from further underground. While human perspectives are naturally oriented horizontally (since we walk upon the surface of the earth rather than dwelling within it), this priority of vertical cooperation over horizontal competition is not initially intuitive. But by empathetically engaging with material bodies

that engage the world differently than do human beings, botanists have learned why such plants can make for friendly neighbors.

These tools—making use of the best information available to identify genuinely foreign perspectives and empathetically engaging with them—are transferable from the field of biomimicry to that of hermeneutics. Furthermore, our brief examination of this field provides some insights into the approach I am proposing. First, it is possible for human beings to approximate the perspectives of other creatures and to learn from that practice. The successful application of biomimicry to a number of different fields demonstrates this. The fact that we cannot engage with those creatures linguistically does not prevent this project from being undertaken. Second, setting aside our anthropocentric lenses and adopting those of another material body does not require us to abandon our concern for the welfare of human beings. The Land Institute seeks a sustainable way for human beings to feed ourselves; it does not seek a way to restore the native prairies with no care for human agricultural needs. What it does do is relativize human concerns—the question becomes not simply how we can feed ourselves, but how we can do so without destroying the ecosystem and placing future generations at risk. These two insights indicate that there is reason to hope that we can learn something by trying to engage foreign perspectives and that doing so does not require an "anti-human" stance. With this encouragement, we will now turn to developing the method of ecomimetic interpretation.

Ecomimetic Interpretation

Biomimetic thinking adopts the perspectives of other creatures that possess *bios*— the life with which we are familiar. For a truly ecological hermeneutical stance, I have shifted to the term "ecomimetic." The prefix, eco-, comes from the Greek word *oikos*,

meaning household. It is the root for such terms as ecumenical, economic, and ecological. I have made this shift to encourage the interpreter to take *all* members of creation into consideration, even those that are more commonly marginalized as "inanimate." Soil, water, rocks, and carbon atoms are all just as much creations of God as are birds, trees, mountain goats, and human beings. Approximating the perspectives of those most foreign to human beings is an important component in any effort to resist the distortions of anthropocentrism.

Ecomimetic interpretation brings the ecological hermeneutics of Norman Habel into conversation with both liberation hermeneutics and biomimicry. Recall that Habel's revised hermeneutics involves three elements: suspicion, identification, and retrieval. Suspicion is the recognition that both the text and the interpreter possess anthropocentric biases. These biases assume that human beings "are beings of a totally different order than all other creatures in nature," and view material beings other than humans "as separate, other, and a force to be harnessed."[54] For Habel, identification means interpreters must reposition themselves alongside the earth community, rather than in opposition to it: "A reader using this approach must…come to terms with his or her deep ecological connections" and "face the prior ecological reality of our kinship with Earth: that we are born of Earth, and that we are living expressions of the ecosystem that has emerged on this planet."[55] As will be explored further below, my approach reinterprets this element in conversation with Delores Williams' womanist hermeneutic and biomimicry to emphasize the need to identify with a particular member of the earth community, rather than with the Earth as a whole. Habel's final element, retrieval,

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[54] Habel, *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics*, 4.
[55] Habel, *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics,* 4-5.

involves separating the anthropocentric biases of traditional interpretation from the text in order to re-examine the contributions of "the nonhuman characters in the story." As Habel explains, "Earth or members of the Earth community may play a key role or be highly valued in the text, but because of the Western interpretative tradition we have inherited, this dimension of the text has been ignored or suppressed."[56] Retrieval may even extend to a creative re-appropriation when the text itself has ignored or suppressed the voices of the Earth, "reconstructing the narrative…in such a way as to hear Earth as the narrator of the story…In such a narrative, Earth also becomes an interpreter."[57] Habel, et al., recognize their indebtedness to feminist and other liberation hermeneutics for the shape of this method. We will now turn to developing it further in conversation with Delores Williams' work on womanist hermeneutics.

In conversation with black liberation theology, Williams challenges the subconscious biases that can inhibit a truly liberating understanding of the task of interpretation. To black (predominantly male) liberation theologians, she poses the question,

> Have they, in the use of the Bible, identified so thoroughly with the theme of Israel's election that they have not seen the oppressed of the oppressed in scripture? Have they identified so completely with Israel's liberation that they have been blind to the awful reality of victims making victims in the Bible?[58]

Recognizing that over-identification can create blind spots for interpreters, Williams proposes a hermeneutic "that allows them to become conscious of what has been made invisible in the text and to see that their work is in collusion with this 'invisibilization' of

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[56] Habel, *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics*, 5.
[57] Habel, *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics*, 5.
[58] Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 149.

black women's experience."[59] She calls her womanist hermeneutic one of identification-ascertainment, involving "three modes of inquiry: subjective, communal and objective."[60] The subjective inquiry requires interpreters to become aware of their own perspectival lenses by examining which characters and events they personally identify with. The communal inquiry broadens this investigation to see the broader cultural/communal perspectives that shape individual perspectives, asking with what "biblical faith, events and biblical characters…the community has identified."[61] The final inquiry exposes the lenses of the biblical writers by examining "*both* the biblical events, characters and circumstances with whom the biblical writers have identified *and* those with whom the biblical writers have not identified, that is, those who are victims of those with whom the biblical writers have identified."[62] More than simply naming the issue of subconscious bias, Williams provides interpreters with a strategy for ascertaining that bias in themselves, their communal tradition, and the texts.

Ecomimetic interpretation draws from both Williams's identification-ascertainment and Habel's ecojustice approaches, allowing them to mutually inform one another. Ecomimetic interpretation can be broadly conceived in four stages: suspicion and resistance, ascertainment, identification, and dialogue. The first stage of *suspicion and resistance* grows from the liberationist suspicion that undergirds both Williams's and Habel's approaches: the suspicion that the texts are shaped by implicit biases that elevate certain characters and concerns while marginalizing others. In ecomimetic interpretation, this suspicion extends beyond the texts to the interpreters as well. With Habel, I assume

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[59] Williams, 149.
[60] Williams, 149.
[61] Williams, 149.
[62] Williams, 149-150.

that because Christian texts are written by and for humans, they will be shaped by anthropocentric biases. With Williams, I must ask if Christian interpreters, including myself, have identified so thoroughly with human concerns that we have not seen the material bodies most marginalized by the tradition. Ecomimetic suspicion and resistance requires addressing one's own anthropocentric biases, and occurs before one takes up the task of ecomimetic interpretation itself. It consists of recognizing one's own perspectival and epistemic biases that create anthropocentric blind spots, and deciding to resist those biases. This was undertaken in the Introduction, when I discussed the fact that human interpreters perceive the world from human perspectives. We instinctively identify with those we perceive to be most like ourselves. The decision to resist these biases is based on the belief that the perspectives of other material bodies should be incorporated into theological thinking because their inclusion will provide a more helpful and accurate theological framework, or because their status as creatures of God makes their inclusion intrinsically worthwhile, or both. As the preliminary position adopted before engaging in ecomimetic interpretation at all, I will not address it again separately when I engage in such interpretation.

The second stage of *ascertainment* examines anthropocentric biases within the text or tradition. This stage corresponds to Williams's communal inquiry, as the interpreter engages in the exegetical and historical work of uncovering how this text or tradition has been interpreted and received. What meanings have previous interpreters ascribed to it? With what characters, circumstances, and events have they identified? With what have they failed to identify? This ascertainment will lead to the identification of a host of perspectives that have been neglected, both within and beyond the realm of

human perspectives. For example, the authors and interpreters of the story of Sarah and Hagar have not only neglected the perspective of Hagar, but also that of the unborn Ishmael, of the animals he would hunt, and of the springs and wells that provided life to them all. From this process of ascertainment, the interpreter selects one or more marginalized perspectives to be examined in further depth.

The third stage of *identification* involves empathetically engaging that foreign perspective apart from the text. While Habel's approach specifies that the interpreter should identify with the Earth community, Williams's approach provides insight into how such identification can be more personal. For Williams, identification with Hagar involves looking at female sexual and reproductive exploitation through the lens of American slavery and the ongoing exploitation of black women in America today. Identification requires building a connection between the interpreter and the character in the text. When the ecomimetic interpreter tries to identify with a foreign perspective, this move will require research into what science and history can tell us about that material body itself, how it exists, lives, moves, or grows apart from the text or tradition in question. For the following ecomimetic interpretation of the same passages examined by Williams, identification with the inanimate characters of the spring and the well involves examining the hydrogeology of a Middle Eastern deserts. The task of the interpreter is to construct an approximation of the foreign perspective that is to be engaged.

The final stage of *dialogue* brings the approximated perspective back into conversation with the text or tradition. Here, the interpreter no longer identifies with the character, event, or circumstances that she typically does, nor with those with which the tradition has identified. Rather, the interpreter identifies with what has been traditionally

rendered invisible or marginalized, and engages the text again. What emerges from this exercise can then be brought into conversation with the traditional interpretations of the text or doctrine in order to allow them to mutually inform and correct one another.

The Waters of Beer-lahai-roi: An Ecomimetic Example

In the rest of this work I will explore how ecomimetic interpretation can challenge and reconstruct traditional interpretations of the christological claim that Christ is *homoousios* with both the Father and with human beings. Before turning to that, however, I will demonstrate how ecomimetic interpretation works through a more concrete example of biblical interpretation. For this exercise, I will examine the Hagar/water stories of Genesis 16:1-16 and 21:8-21. I have selected these texts for three reasons. First, because my ecomimetic approach draws so heavily from Williams' own work with these texts, it seemed only fitting to see what it might bring into conversation with her womanist interpretation. Second, unlike many texts, these stories do not instruct the audience to learn from other parts of creation (as when in Matthew 6 the audience is instructed to consider the birds of the air and lilies of the field), and therefore this examination cannot be accused of selectively appropriating a darling text of ecotheology. If ecomimetic interpretation can add to the depth of this story or help clarify its interpretation, it is likely to be useful in other settings as well. Finally, the only non-human "characters" in these stories are springs and wells—non-living entities that are comprised of water and rock. Such material bodies are the most resistant to anthropomorphic projection because of their radical differences from human beings. I am using these texts because Williams opened my eyes to the injustice that European and Euro-American interpretative traditions have done to Hagar and Ishmael, and I wonder if

anthropocentric interpretative traditions have similarly overlooked what contributions the spring and the well make to these stories.

Ascertainment

Following the suspicion that wisdom might be gained from paying attention to the neglected "perspectives" of other-than-human material bodies in religious traditions, the next step of ecomimetic interpretation is ascertainment of how the text has been interpreted and received. Genesis 16:1-16 tells of Sarai's machinations to obtain a child despite her barrenness by giving her Egyptian slave Hagar to her husband. When Hagar conceives, Sarai perceives her to be contemptuous of her mistress, and abuses her. This prompts Hagar to action: she runs away from Sarai to a well-known spring on the north-eastern boundary of Egypt. There she encounters an angel who conveys God's promises regarding her son and tells her to return to Sarai.[63] In Genesis 21:8-21, Sarah has gotten a new name and given birth to a son of her own. Fearing that Hagar's son Ishmael might interfere with her biological son Isaac's inheritance, Sarah demands that Abraham cast out Hagar and Ishmael. Abraham sends the mother and child into the wilderness with a water skin and some bread. Lost in a foreign land, when they run out of water Hagar gives herself and her son up for dead before an angel repeats God's promises for the boy and God "opened her eyes" so that she perceives a well of water.

White Male Interpretation

Sarah and Abraham, the matriarch and patriarch of some of the world's most influential religions, are not portrayed sympathetically in these stories. They do not wait for God to fulfill God's promises, but rather engage in sexual surrogacy in order to bring

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[63] Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis, A Commentary* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1956), 190.

about their desired ends. Then they abuse and abandon the victims of their manipulations.

Nevertheless, Abraham is held up as the father of faith in the Christian tradition. This

might explain why commentators often seem primarily concerned with justifying Abram

and Sarai's actions in the first pericope. In his justification of their behavior, E. A.

Speiser draws from the Code of Hammurabi and the Nuzi documents to demonstrate that

a barren woman could legally obtain a child of her own during that time by providing a

handmaiden to her husband for impregnation.[64] Sarai's behavior towards Hagar was

justified by law and custom. The remainder of the story is treated as an etiological

attempt to explain the name of the spring, Beer-lahai-roi, and as evidence that God's care

extends beyond the elected Abraham and Isaac to include Ishmael and Hagar as well.[65]

Despite the fact that this story is clearly centered on Hagar, interpreters focus the

theological weight of the text on Sarai and Abram, and the weakness of their faith that

cannot wait upon God: "the story of Hagar shows us…a fainthearted faith that cannot

leave things with God and believes it necessary to help things along."[66] According to

these interpretations, this failure of faith prompts all of the difficulties of the text.

Discussion of the second pericope tends to focus on textual issues, notably that

this story is a parallel to the first reflecting a different tradition and author.[67] Evidence for

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[64] E. A. Speiser, *Genesis, The Anchor Bible* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1964) 119-121. Gerhard von Rad takes the matter further, arguing that not only was Sarai within her rights, but Hagar's disdain for Sarai merited her punishment, 186-187. See also Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982) 151, and Susan Niditch, "Genesis" in *Women's Bible Commentary, Expanded Edition*, ed. by Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998) 20.

[65] See von Rad, "What is concerned here is obviously an old place name with which a sacred tradition was connected," 189; and Brueggemann, "The positive implication is that God is turned towards the outsider," 152.

[66] Von Rad, 191. See also Brueggemann, 152-153.

[67] Gen 16:1-16 is attributed to the "J" author, while Genesis 21:8-21 is attributed to the "E" author. See von Rad, 186; and Speiser, 119 & 156

this is seen in the different characters of Hagar and Abraham: Hagar is no longer the headstrong or tactless woman of chapter 16, rather she "is the downtrodden slave throughout."[68] Abraham does not consent to Hagar and Ishmael's expulsion with the same readiness that he had to Sarai's abuse of Hagar in the first passage. He only agrees to abandon them when God has reassured him that God will provide for them.[69] These differences are used as evidence for multiple-source hypotheses, alleging that although both pericopes draw from the same background material, each represents a distinct traditional interpretation of that story.[70] Although Brueggemann does not focus on the source critical aspects of the second pericope, he does understand its theological import to echo that of the first: God cares and provides for all, even those that do not receive the promise.[71] The well functions as a prop that discloses this theme—God reveals the well to Hagar, thus providing for both her and her son.

Womanist Interpretation

Approaching the text from the social situation of an African-American woman, Delores Williams refuses to allow the story to be wrested away from Hagar and her son. Drawing from the experience of black female slaves in the United States, she does not excuse either Sarai or Abram for the sexual surrogacy inflicted on Hagar.[72] Despite its legality, Williams notes, "More than in the areas of nurturance and field labor, coerced surrogacy in the area of sexuality was threatening to slave women's self-esteem and

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[68] Speiser, 157. See also von Rad, 230.
[69] Speiser, 157, and von Rad, 230.
[70] Speiser, 157, and von Rad 230.
[71] Brueggemann, 183.
[72] Williams, 60-71.

sense of self-worth."[73] Rather than viewing Hagar's supposed contempt for Sarai as a legal offense, Williams explores other possible explanations:

> Did she lose pride and status because of Sarai's betrayal of her virginity? Could it be that Hagar's argument with Sarai had nothing to do with her wanting to take over Sarai's position with Abram, but that Hagar's resentment was because Sarai's betrayal of her would become obvious when her pregnancy by Abram became obvious? Could it be that both women were concerned about loss of status but for different reasons? Could it be that in the consciousness of foreign slaves like Hagar there was no particular value assigned to female slaves on the basis of their reproducing babies who became the property of the slave owners?[74]

These are questions not addressed by interpreters who assume that the legality of sexual surrogacy in patriarchal times resolves all moral issues raised by Sarai and Abram's behavior. Following Hagar through the first pericope, Williams does not find a God of liberation, but rather lifts up Hagar as "the first female in the Bible to liberate herself from oppressive power structures."[75] By running away, Hagar frees herself, and the divine role is limited to ordering her back into bondage, with an accompanying promise that her son would live to grow up. At best, Williams concedes that God's action might have been concerned with the survival of Hagar and Ishmael, with providing them with the resources necessary to survive the first few years of the child's life from Abram's wealth.[76]

In the second pericope, Abraham and Sarah force Hagar into the unenviable position of becoming a homeless single mother, trying to provide for her small family with no resources of her own. Once again, God's concern seems aimed more towards survival than flourishing or liberation. By revealing the presence of the well to Hagar,

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[73] Williams, 67.
[74] Williams, 17-18.
[75] Williams, 19.
[76] Williams, 21.

"God gave her new vision to see survival resources where she saw none before."[77] For Williams, these stories emphasize something other than the importance of passively awaiting the fulfillment of God's promises. First, she understands Hagar's flight from Sarai's abuse to indicate that there is an important role for human initiative in liberation—an interpretation that contradicts readings that view this episode as the unfortunate consequence of what happens when humans interfere with God's plans. Second, God is concerned with something other than the freedom (or liberation) that has long been central to Christian theology. Hagar's return to the relative safety of slavery with Abram demonstrates the complexities of God's purposes, which cannot be conveyed with one word (like liberation), no matter how powerful that word is in the human imagination. Hagar's survival had to be secured before her flourishing or her liberation could be attained. Finally, according to this interpretation, God's provision can often be more of vision than of active intervention. God did not cause water to flow from a rock in order to save Hagar and Ishmael. Instead, God gave Hagar the vision to see the resources that were already available to her.

Williams's reading of these stories demonstrates that traditional interpretations can be critiqued, challenged, and fundamentally reshaped when one pays attention to the perspectives of previously marginalized characters. Her work provides a different perspective on the character and purposes of God as well as on the God/human relationship than does the tradition that emphasizes God's determination of all events, God's character as a liberator, and the importance of faith over action in human religious life.

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[77] Williams, 32.

Ecojustice Interpretation

As the reader may have noticed, the water that sustains Hagar in both of these pericopes receives scant attention from interpreters. In the first passage, the spring serves only as a foil for discussing the characteristics of God that contribute to its naming. In the second passage, the well is a prop, life support for Hagar and Ishmael who are the actual characters within these stories. Although Genesis 16 and 21 are not often discussed by ecotheologians, Laura Hobgood-Oster takes up the challenge in her examination of well stories in Genesis.[78] She sets the stage for adopting a truly ecomimetic approach, noting that "Usually readers think of these wells and springs as the settings for other important events rather than as significant subjects in and of themselves. But can the wells as central characters provide insight as we seek a new understanding of Scripture from the perspective of the Earth?"[79]

As a member of the EBT, Hobgood-Oster brings the Hagar stories into conversation with the ecojustice principle of resistance, arguing that "those who suffer under the hand of oppressive humans are actively aided in the quest for justice."[80] By identifying the wells and springs of water as characters in their own rights, she urges the reader to identify with them. The spring in the first pericope acts as a refuge for Hagar, and the well is portrayed as "one of the most powerful acts of justice presented in Genesis."[81] As Hobgood-Oster notes, "wells provide life-giving water for the most oppressed, the slaves, the banished ones…Earth…acts with justice…ecojustice takes

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[78] See Laura Hobgood-Oster, "'For Our of that Well the Flocks were Watered': Stories of Wells in Genesis," in *The Earth Story in Genesis*, ed. by Norman C. Habel & Shirley Wurst (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2000), 187-199.

[79] Hobgood-Oster, 187.

[80] Hobgood-Oster, 189.

[81] Hobgood-Oster, 193.

place and water brings life to all."[82] This interpretation elevates the status of the water from that of mere set-piece to active hero in the ongoing drama in the desert. Hobgood-Oster's examination of the well further raises questions regarding the ability of human beings to perceive the agency of the Earth. Abused and abandoned Hagar was unable to see the well until God opened her eyes, prompting Hobgood-Oster to ask, "do oppressors block the view of the oppressed by reserving the resources for themselves?"[83]

By treating the wells and springs of water as characters of their own, Hobgood-Oster invites the reader to begin to perceive them and the theological questions they raise. However, her reading does not treat them fully as subjects, as ends unto themselves. In this essay, Hobgood-Oster praises water for its life-sustaining capacities. She notes that "In the beginning water arose *for* all of life" and that "water brings life *to* all."[84] This recognizes the importance of water to human beings, as living creatures, but it does not enter into the perspective of the water itself. That task requires further identification with the water, a task to which we will now turn.

Identification

Identification begins by marshalling what one already knows about the material body in question, and then proceeds through further research. In this section we will first recall what school children learn about water, before turning to the work of a Middle Eastern hydrogeologist to gain a deeper understanding of water in the time and place of the biblical patriarchs.

Water

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[82] Hobgood-Oster, 193-194.
[83] Hobgood-Oster, 194.
[84] Hobgood-Oster, 193 & 194, emphasis added.

The liters of water flowing from the spring of Beer-lahai-roi and those contained in the well of Gen 21:19 are part of the vast community of water that makes up 71% of the earth's surface, as well as 60% of the human body. As we learned long ago, water is a malleable and mobile substance. When the temperatures drop low enough, the liquid becomes solid, and when they rise high enough it becomes vapor. Surface water evaporates and moves through the atmosphere from one place to another before returning to the ground as liquid or solid. Planetary conditions, from the wobble of the earth's rotation to its tilt upon its axis influence temperature fluctuations that affect how much water is deposited where. It can exist as fresh water, pure enough to sustain human life, brackish water filled with other material bodies that render it unusable by humans but suitable for some animals and salt-resistant plants, or salt water that is useless for agricultural purposes but makes up the largest life-sustaining ecosystem on this planet. While these variations certainly determine how human beings value the water they encounter, it is not at all clear that brackish or salt waters have any less intrinsic value than fresh, regardless of our utilitarian valuations of it. Water is consumed, used, and excreted by living organisms. It also flows over, around, and into soil and rock, shaping the landscapes that we see around us. It flushes out toxins and carries microbes that can cause diseases. It is the body of floods, and its absence is perceived as drought. It can exist without living creatures, but we know of no life on earth that could survive without water.

Water in the Negev

While water is frequently taken for granted in the humid climates of Western countries, "In arid and semi-arid countries…water is the essence of life which is not

guaranteed. Its appearance is irregular and random and when it fails to appear famine and death are the consequences."[85] The Hagar stories are set in the southernmost regions of Palestine, in and at the border of the Negev desert. The climate in this area has varied between colder, wet periods when water flowed through streams, and warmer, dry periods when water could only be found by digging into the dry streambeds. Hydrogeologist Arie Issar describes the ground of the northern Negev as "impermeable chalks overlain by impermeable loess (silt). In the river-beds permeable sand and gravel layers are found."[86] This formation creates a subterranean water table along those beds. Where the chalk is fractured, water run-off can enlarge the fracture and create storage areas full of fresh water. However, water further from the stream bed may be saline because the chalk over which it runs still contains salt from its own origin in the sea.[87] In some areas, the ground water naturally finds its way to the surface in seepages and springs, creating areas that sustain perennial vegetation, rather than only allowing growth during seasonal rains.[88] The weather patterns and geological formations of this area lead to the formation of different communities of water—some fresh, some saline, and some brackish—all located in close proximity to one another and invisible from the surface.

Where streams and springs are non-existent or insufficient to support human endeavors, human beings dig wells in order to access fresh water accumulated below the surface of the ground. However, the hydrogeology of the Negev makes such enterprises difficult. A well might be dug too far from the streambed, hitting impermeable silt and

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[85] Arie S. Issar, *Strike the Rock and There Shall Come Water: Climate Changes, Water Resources and History of the Lands of the Bible* (New York: Springer, 2014), 29

[86] Arie S. Issar, *Water Shall Flow from the Rock: Hydrogeology and Climate in the Lands of the Bible* (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1990), 83.

[87] Issar, *Strike the Rock*, 87

[88] Isaar, *Strike the Rock*, 85.

resulting in either a dry well or a deeper well that draws up unusable saline water from underneath the silt. Alternatively, a well dug to the right depth at the right distance from the streambed could access fresh water stored in the gravel layer.[89] In biblical times, digging wells involved a significant amount of manual labor and required an intimate knowledge of the terrain—and possibly a healthy dose of good fortune. Among semi-nomadic pastoralists, knowledge of the locations of such wells would be proprietary. The person who dug the well would remember where it was located, but would cover it over when not using it to prevent the water's depletion by others.[90] A foreigner might very well sit down near a well and yet remain oblivious to its existence. While there is no reason to think that it makes any difference to the water itself, a well could be considered domesticated water, subject to ownership rights, in contrast to a spring of wild, living water, available to any who passed by.

Dialogue

In the final step of ecomimetic interpretation, what has been learned in the previous steps is brought into conversation with the text and tradition. Here we bring our knowledge of water, springs, and wells into conversation with the Genesis pericopes. The spring makes its first appearance in Genesis 16:7. The text gives it no further description than that of spring, but such a spring of flowing water would have been a resource for travelers to refill their own supplies and for pastoralists to water their livestock as they moved about in search of ample vegetation. There would have been an underground source of the water that found its own way to the surface, where it was available for

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[89] Isaar, *Water Shall Flow*, 84.
[90] Both Abraham and Isaac's conflicts with Abimelech's people over wells and Isaac's re-digging of Abraham's wells attest to these practices of ownership rights and of covering wells when not in use. See Ge 21:25-31, 26:17-22.

consumption, for evaporation, or for reabsorption into the ground and the subterranean water table. This spring is not given or revealed to Hagar by God. She flees from Sarai to the spring, and there the angel *finds* her. As an Egyptian, Hagar may have been aware of this oasis before she came into Sarai's possession, or the caravan may have stopped there while she was traveling with Abram and Sarai. However she found it, Hagar had fled a situation of oppression and reached a location that offered water for vegetation and animal life alike. Divine intervention did not lead her there—it was there that the angel found her. In this story it seems that life called to life, the unrestrained water and the self-liberating woman found one another in the desert. This perspective offers one way of resolving a minor textual difficulty. When the angel asks Hagar, "Where have you come from and where are you going?" Hagar answers only the first question, "I am running away from my mistress Sarai."[91] Although von Rad interprets Hagar's half answer as her failure to answer for her own future, perhaps Hagar ignored the second question because she was not planning to go anywhere.[92] She had reached her destination, an oasis of sustenance and safety far from the manipulations of those who objectified her. While the absence of a town or village nearby indicates that the spring is probably insufficient for supporting a large population, it could be enough for one woman (and her future child). Perhaps Hagar has no need to answer for her future destination, because she believes that she has found her home. In further support that Hagar understands this oasis to be her refuge, she does not leave it unprompted. Rather, the angel orders her to "Return to your mistress, and submit to her," adding the incentive that God would bless her son.[93]

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[91] Gen 16:8.

[92] Von Rad, 189: "Hagar answered the first question openly and defiantly; to the second she has nothing to say. Thereupon the angel takes up both her past and her future."

[93] Gen 16:10-12.

Comparing the well of the second pericope to the spring of the first further illuminates the literary continuities between the two stories. Hagar's character in the second passage has changed—she is not the spirited woman willing to flee into the wilderness to escape abuse. Instead, she seems broken. She accepts her dismissal, the meager provisions offered her, and the prospect of her son's and her own deaths. She does not go straight for a known oasis or seek out provision for her small family. It is possible that they have traveled too far for her to make it back to Beer-lahai-roi with just a skin of water, but it is also possible that she is simply too broken-spirited from years of servitude to make the attempt. The fact that Hagar is unaware of the well's presence indicates that she is in an unknown land. The well is not Abraham's, or else, as a member of his household she would have known of its presence. It was dug by, and belongs to, someone else. The character of the water that saves her in this pericope is not the flowing, living water of a spring, but the domesticated, bound water of a well. Both Hagar and the water have been objectified, manipulated for the purposes of others, and then abandoned. In both pericopes, the water and Hagar reflect one another: first free and spirited, and later marginalized and oppressed. While it is possible that these are simply two strands of tradition telling the same story differently, the transformed character of the water echoes Hagar's own transformed character, each brought about by their objectification by others. This provides a narrative explanation that demonstrates the literary coherence of including both passages in the final version of Genesis. The differences reflect the development of characters in situations of oppression. Both Hagar and the water have been tamed.

Ecomimetic interpretation does not require the abandonment of all previous insights. In these stories, water obviously does represent life. Water provides a refuge to Hagar in the first pericope, and salvation to her and her son in the second. But identifying with the water itself allows us to see it as something more than just a symbol of life. The water that seemed to be giving itself freely in the first story is forced into service in the second, providing its own body in the place of what Hagar cannot provide to her son. Other human beings have manipulated the ground water, objectified it, and exerted property rights over it. Such enslaved water is hidden from view, not available to every living being.

Engaging with the water in these stories helps explain the literary reasons for including both stories in the final version of Genesis. Their different characterizations of Hagar and the water yield a subversive indictment of legal processes that allow the commodification of water and women. Ownership and abuse steal away Hagar's initiative. Ownership and exclusion sequesters the well's life-saving potential. The jealous guarding of property rights to wells nearly costs Hagar and Ishmael their lives. In the final pericope, they would have died if God had not shown flagrant disregard for the property rights of whoever dug that well by revealing its location to Hagar. This heightens the critique of objectification and commodification of God's creation, a critique that has been largely ignored in traditional interpretations.

Conclusion

This brief ecomimetic interpretation of Genesis 16 and 21 is in no way exhaustive of what might be learned by examining either water or its role in these stories. Yet it grants further depth to these passages, yields different insights into the relationships

between members of creation, and raises theological questions about the water rights that undergird many human conflicts. It raises the question of how human beings should interact with one of the most common material bodies on this planet. While technology and culture have rendered water practically invisible to moral consideration in Western societies, ecomimetic interpretation focuses on water to an extent that blurs strictly human considerations. It takes a passage that has long been interpreted as focused on faith in God's promises, and recasts it in the light of a prophetic critique of social structures that commodify people and water alike.

The purpose of ecomimetic interpretation is not to do away with traditional interpretations. Rather, it is to bring such traditional interpretations into conversation with perspectives that have been rendered invisible by anthropocentric lenses. By ascertaining how anthropocentric biases have distorted traditional interpretations, identifying alternative perspectives from which to engage the tradition, and bringing the two into dialogue, ecomimetic interpretation provides tools for *resisting* the subjective anthropocentrism that we cannot *escape*.

In the next chapter, we will undertake the second step of ecomimetic interpretation in relation to conciliar christology as we examine how the claim that Jesus is both God and man has been interpreted.

3

What's an *Ousia*?

Having explained how anthropocentric biases have distorted modern interpretations of the incarnation and offered a method for exchanging anthropocentric lenses for ecomimetic ones in order to resist those biases, the rest of this work will focus on re-engaging conciliar christology from a less anthropocentric perspective. In this chapter, we will explore how conciliar christology developed under anthropocentric pressures, tracing the ways that the early church used the concept of *ousia* in answering the question, "What is Christ?" In the next two chapters, we will examine what elements of this doctrine are brought into focus through ecomimetic lenses and how an ecomimetically-modified interpretation addresses the coherence and plausibility challenges raised in the Chapter 1.

In order to begin this process of re-engagement, I will first introduce the range of meanings that *ousia* had in ancient philosophy, and the role that the concepts of substance and species played in categorizing reality. Next I will turn to how the councils used *ousia* (essence or substance) and *physis* (nature) in their christological definitions. Finally, I will explore the theological value of understanding the contemporary upshot of conciliar christology as asserting that there are two, and only two, *ousiai* in all of reality, and the problems the councils created by their emphasis on the *human nature* of Jesus Christ.

Ousia and Categories

Over several centuries of debate, Christian theologians have developed technical uses of the terms *ousia* and *hypostasis*. Orthodox Christianity has come to describe the Trinity as one *ousia* in three *hypostases*, using *ousia* to signify the divine essence of the

Godhead and *hypostasis* to describe the distinct persons of the Trinity based on their "specific individuating characteristics."[1] The Council of Chalcedon (451) uses the language of *ousia* and *hypostasis* to describe Jesus Christ as *homoousios* with the Father and *homoousios* with humanity, being in two natures (*physeis*) that come together in "a single person (*prosopon*) and a single subsistent being (*hypostasis*)."[2] In this description, *ousia* seems to indicate a broad category of being, while *hypostasis* indicates a narrower category of individual being in its particularity.[3] The church had not made this distinction in 325, however, when the Council of Nicaea seemed to use *ousia* and *hypostasis* synonymously in anathematizing Arius's proposition that the Son was of a different substance than the Father. In response to the Arian argument, the council condemned "those who say…that he came to be…from another *hypostasis* or substance (*ousia*)."[4] In order to understand the theological significance of the ecumenical councils' pronouncements that Jesus Christ is "*homoousios* with the Father" and "*homoousios* with us," we will need to first examine how both substance and nature were used in philosophical circles during the first few centuries of the Christian movement.[5]

The term *ousia* had a wide range of meaning in ancient thought. We can begin to appreciate its diversity by noting that it is the noun form of the Greek verb for "to be," and is commonly translated into English as "being," "substance," or "essence," each of which is open to a wide range of possible meaning. In his review of Aristotelian,

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[1] Mike Higton, "Hypostasis," in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology*, ed. by Ian A. McFarland, David A. S. Fergusson, Karen Kilby, and Iain R. Torrance (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) 229-230.
[2] Tanner, 86.
[3] Higton, 229.
[4] Tanner, 5.
[5] See the Council of Ephesus's "Formula of Union," and the Council of Chalcedon's "Definition of Faith," in Tanner, 70 & 86.

Platonic, Stoic, and early Christian uses of the term, Christopher Stead notes that it has no

less than seven (and possibly as many as twenty-eight) different possible connotations,

namely: category/status, substance, form/species, definition, stuff/material, mere

existence, and truth/fact.[6] These different meanings do not have bright lines defining the

boundaries between them, but rather indicate the various implications that can be

involved in the term *ousia*. At bottom, *ousia* as category involves the "ontological

status" of a thing and can range from defining the "distinctive mode of existence" of a

particular thing to indicating the broad category of being itself (in contrast to something

that does not exist, or to a false proposition).[7] The equation of *ousia* with substance need

not be taken to refer to a materialistic concept, but rather indicates "the most permanent

form of being" or "a thing's proper and necessary function" (perhaps best translated as

essence because it is often distinguished from that thing's changeable characteristics, or

accidents).[8] *Ousia* as form or species connects to the "permanent or 'substantial'

character of a thing," indicating the "character which cannot be lost without the thing in

question ceasing to exist"—a meaning that can elide with *ousia* as substance.[9] *Ousia* as

definition indicates something even more specific, the "special character or individuality"

of a thing.[10] While the meanings 'stuff' or 'material' are literally materialistic, the

concept extends analogically to immaterial realities such as souls, gods, and the Platonic

Ideas or Forms.[11]

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[6] Christopher Stead, *Divine Substance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977) 132 ff.
[7] Stead. 137-138.
[8] Stead, 138-142.
[9] Stead, 146-149.
[10] Stead, 149-153.
[11] Stead, 142-146. Stead gives the theological example of "the *ousia* of God is *pneuma*/spirit" to indicate the analogical method of applying this category to God (143).

The first four clusters of meaning in Stead's list all involve different kinds of answers to the question, "What is it?" *Ousia* understood as category, substance, species, or definition has to do with the appropriate classification of a thing. Ancient systems of classification, like modern ones, consist of categories that are nested in hierarchies of generality and value. Unlike modern systems of classifications, in ancient systems the terms used to describe these categories did not necessarily change when one moved from one level to another. For example, the modern taxonomy of living organisms, proceeding from the more particular to the general, consists of the following categories: species, genus, family, order, class, phylum, kingdom, and domain, or superkingdom. In contrast, pre-modern categorical terminology used species to refer both to the *most* particular categories to which living beings belong, and to the *more* particular level in a hierarchy of categories. Qualifiers could be used to indicate the two endpoints of a system of categorization: *infima species* indicating "A determinate form of the lowest generality, which does not admit of any further differentiation," and *genus summum*, indicating "the most inclusive and ultimate class that is not a sub-class of any further genus."[12] Starting at the level of an individual being, the particular person, Socrates, belongs to the *infima species* of human beings.[13] The species human being belongs to the genus of perceptive living things—a more inclusive category. The genus of perceptive living things could then be viewed as a species of the genus of living things, which in turn is a species of destructible mobile substances. This is then a species of the genus mobile substances.[14]

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[12] The Blackwell Dictionary of Western Philosophy, s.v. "*infima species*" and "genus."

[13] Of course, the *infima species* can actually be subdivided on the basis of any number of characteristics (such as gender or eye color), but these further subdivisions were not considered useful sub-categories for the investigations pursued.

[14] Studtmann, Paul, "Aristotle's Categories", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* 2.2.1 (Summer 2014 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2014/entries/aristotle-categories/>.

Because it does not refer to only one level within this nested hierarchy, Stead describes

Aristotle's use of species as "in this connection…complex and inconsistent," noting that,

"Sometimes the whole hierarchy of classes is lumped together and called indifferently

'species' or 'genera.'"[15]

Nevertheless, Aristotle did differentiate between primary *ousia*, which in the

Categories he takes to indicate the individual being of a thing in all of its particularity,

from secondary *ousia*, which he understood as the category—species or genus—to which

it belongs.[16] Later Platonists disapproved of this prioritization of individual instantiations

over more universal terms, because they viewed universal, intelligible realities as more

real than individual, perceptible material realities. They therefore reversed the

terminology, using primary *ousia* to indicate the more universal, intelligible Ideas,

invoking other terms to indicate more particular instantiations of those Ideas.[17] Similarly,

Stoics sometimes used *ousia* to refer to individual realities, but reserved primary *ousia* or

hyle (matter) to refer to the more general, unqualified substance of which everything else

was made.[18] All of these philosophical schools recognized a range of meanings attached

to whatever term they used to indicate substance. Substance could be used inclusively to

refer to the whole created order, to a specific order of being, to a genus, or even to an

individual in its particularity. Primary substance could be used to refer to individual

beings, to the shared origin or reality of things, to the immaterial but intelligible Ideas, to

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[15] Stead, 74.

[16] As Aristotle explains, "Substance, in the truest and primary and most definite sense of the word, is that which is neither predicable of a subject nor present in a subject; for instance, the individual man or horse. But in a secondary sense those things are called substances within which, as species, the primary substances are included; also those which, as genera, include the species." *Categories* 2a11-16, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. by Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941) 9. See also Stead, 57-62.

[17] Stead, 115-116.

[18] Stead, 116.

divinity, or even to the Father alone.[19] In sum, *ousia* could be used to indicate any level

of specificity between the *genus summum* and the *infima species*. Modern interpreters

cannot assume that the terms used by ancient authors indicate certain distinctions

between the individual and the more general that have come to be associated with those

terms. While it appears that these ancient authors both understood those distinctions and

used them in framing their own arguments, their word choices did not necessarily reflect

such distinctions.

Although the terminology was far from fixed, these different categories were

considered real, distinctive substances. *Infima species* was a fixed category. Despite the

fact that their mutability was part of what separated perceptible individuals from the

intelligible Ideas from which they drew their forms, it was assumed that they could not

change from one species to another. An acorn might grow into an oak tree, but it would

not change into a hickory tree. This concept of species is associated with understandings

of substance as the permanent character of natural kinds, "a character which cannot be

lost without the thing in question ceasing to exist."[20] Aristotle connected the permanent

character of a species to its nature, or *physis*.[21] He described nature as the inner principle

of change ("motion and stationariness") in a thing, the "source and cause of being moved

and being at rest."[22] Each species has a nature, and this leads every species towards the

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[19] Stead, 115-118.

[20] Stead, 148.

[21] While *ousia* is a nominative form of the Greek verb, *eimi/einai*, meaning "to be," *physis* is related to the verb *phyo*, meaning to beget, bring forth, produce, grow, etc. Although the nature of a being was considered its permanent endowment, physis had a more dynamic element of growth and motion associated with it.

[22] Aristotle, *Physics*, Book II.1, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. by Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941) 236.

fulfilment of its own nature.[23] For a living organism, the motion governed by its nature includes growth and maturation.

Because Aristotle identified primary *ousia* with the substance of the individual being, one could argue that nature had to do with the individual's development to its own particular mature form. However, Aristotle recognized species and genus as real, even if secondary, substances. Individual variation within a species could be distinguished from the differences in nature that separated one species from another. As Daniel Dennett explains,

> Since no two organisms are exactly alike…there were as many different kinds of organisms as there were organisms, but it seemed obvious that the differences could be graded, sorted into minor and major, or *accidental* and *essential*…Aristotle had developed his theory of essences as an improvement on Plato's theory of Ideas, according to which every earthly thing is a sort of imperfect copy or reflection of an ideal exemplar or Form that existed timelessly in the Platonic realm of ideas…But just as no earthly circle, no matter how carefully drawn with a compass…could actually be one of the perfect circles of Euclidean geometry, so no actual eagle could perfectly manifest the essence of eaglehood, though every eagle strove to do so. Everything that existed had a divine specification, which captured its essence…In fact, the word "species" was at one point a standard translation of Plato's Greek word for Form or Idea, *eidos*.[24]

Here we have Aristotelian teleology, wherein the existence of a being is governed by its final cause, the principle that specified the form to which that being should aspire. Because of their common *telē*, individuals could be grouped into species, distinguished on the basis of their essential differences from other species.

All of this is to say that when early theologians said that two things were "of the same substance," it was far from self-evident what exactly they meant. To put this in

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[23] Aristotle, *Physics*, 238.
[24] Daniel C. Dennett, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life* (New York: Penguin Books, 1995) 36.

more concrete terms: two men can be said to be of the same *ousia* simply because they both belong to the *genus summum* of existent reality, or because they are both material bodies, or because they are both human beings, or because they are both composed of body and rational soul. While two unrelated men can be called *homoousios* for any of these reasons, a father and his son were considered *homoousios* on a more intimate level.[25] This indicates that when ancient writers refer to the species of a material body, or use the term *ousia* at the level of species, we cannot assume that they are using species to designate the same type of category that modern scientific classifications of species do.

The ambiguities of *ousia* as species raises two related issues that we will revisit in the final section of this chapter. First, the stable world envisioned by this process of categorization has no way of understanding a plant that developed the power of perception, or an irrational animal that developed rationality (let alone a collection of elements that developed life). From a post-Darwinian perspective, this raises the question: does such development change the *ousia* of the species, or indicate that the offspring is of a different *ousia* than its progenitor? Second, the use of *ousia* to denote the species of a thing does not determine the level of specification within the categorical hierarchy that is intended. On one level, a fish and a tree are of the same substance—the substance of living things. From another perspective, they are of different substances— one a perceptive and mobile living thing, and the other an imperceptive and immobile living thing. So when the ecumenical councils say that Jesus is *homoousios* with us, we must ask whether this should be understood in an exclusive manner as indicating only his

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[25] Stead, 248: "To call a son *homoousios* with his father implies more than merely their common membership of the human race; and the further implication need not be merely that of their physical linkage; the term can evoke their whole biological and social relationship."

consubstantiality with human beings, or should it be understood to include a more general category partaking in the same *ousia*? We will return to these issues after we have examined the use of *ousia* in the Trinitarian and christological debates of the early church.

Ousia and the Early Church

As we have just seen, the concept of *ousia* is grounded in questions about what something is. The early church was quickly confronted with questions about what Jesus Christ was. He was, most evidently, a human being, but the testimony of the scriptures and the apostolic fathers agreed that he was also the Son of God. This created a categorical difficulty which was further confused by Jesus's statement that "I and the Father are One."[26] Christians found themselves defending their faith in the contexts of both Judaism and philosophical schools that had long ago come to the conclusion that God was one, simple, not composed of different things, incorporeal, not subject to change, and therefore not subject to division or growth. Yet they claimed that the Father and the Son were both worthy of worship and were both in some sense divine, while still claiming to worship the one God of Judaism. How they navigated this tension was governed, to a large extent, by what they understood to be necessarily implied by their claim that Jesus saves. We will first examine how they understood this work of the incarnation before turning to how the ecumenical councils defined the person of Christ in light of these soteriological commitments.

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[26] John 10:30; cf John 14:28, "The Father is greater than I."

Soteriological Necessity & The Person of Christ

As the Council of Nicaea claimed, the church has long understood the reason behind the incarnation to be "for us humans and for our salvation."[27] The early church understood the incarnation to be inextricably linked to salvation, and this belief governed what they found theologically acceptable to say about the incarnation. The boundaries on acceptable answers to the question, "What is the Son?" had to be, "Something that can effect salvation." In order to understand why this entailed being "from the *ousia* of the Father" and also "*homoousios* with us," we need to explore how the early church understood salvation.

Without delving into an in-depth review of all the writings on salvation and the work of Christ from the first five centuries of the church, we can get some idea of how early Christians understood the work of Christ by examining one typical exposition of that work—Athanasius' *On the Incarnation of the Word*.[28] Athanasius began his explanation of the incarnation with a description of creation and the origin of humanity's predicament. He described human beings as originating "out of nothing" and therefore naturally inclined to return to nothing—mortal and corruptible by nature.[29] Despite this inauspicious beginning, Athanasius said that God took "especial pity …upon the race of men," and gave them a "further gift."[30] This gift consisted of making human beings "after his own image, giving them a portion even of the power of his own Word" in order that they might be able to remain incorrupt and "abide ever in blessedness."[31] According to

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[27] Tanner, 5.

[28] Athanasius, *On the Incarnation of the Word*, in *Christology of the Later Fathers*, ed. by Edward R. Hardy (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1954).

[29] Hardy, 58. Creation out of nothing was a matter of Christian consensus from the late second century, though not defended by earlier writers like Justin Martyr.

[30] Hardy, 58.

[31] Hardy, 58-59.

this explanation, human beings were by nature subject to death and corruption, but were secured from this tendency through the divine gift of life and incorruption. Nevertheless, this gift was not theirs by nature. This created a problem when human beings turned from God, and "to the things of corruption," becoming "the cause of their own corruption in death."[32] Because human beings were corruptible by nature, once they had turned from God's grace they became infected with their corruption. Athanasius described the ensuing human condition as being subject to infirmity, corruption, and death.[33] Although this was the natural consequence of humanity's actions, it was not suitable that those God made to be incorruptible should fall to corruption. Therefore, it became the task of the Word through whom all had been created in the beginning "to recreate everything."[34]

Athanasius understood the work of salvation to involve several facets and viewed each of these in relation to the life, death, and resurrection of the Word. As he explained,

> That it was in the power of none other to turn the corruptible to incorruption, except the Saviour himself, that had at the beginning also made all things out of nought; and that none other could create anew the likeness of God's image for men, save the image of the Father; and that none other could render the mortal immortal, save our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the very life; and that none other could teach men of the Father, and destroy the worship of idols, save the Word, that orders all things and is alone the true only-begotten Son of the Father. But since it was necessary also that the debt owing from all should be paid again, for…it was owing that all should die…to this intent, after the proofs of his Godhead from his works, he next offered up his sacrifice on behalf of all, yielding his temple to death in the stead of all, in order firstly to make men quit and free of their old trespass, and further to show himself more powerful even than death, displaying his own body incorruptible as first fruits of the resurrection for all.[35]

Here Athanasius described the work of the incarnation in at least five different ways: it turns human beings from corruption, renews the image of God, brings immortality to

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[32] Hardy, 60.
[33] Hardy, 62.
[34] Hardy, 62.
[35] Hardy, 73-74.

mortal beings, teaches true knowledge of God, and satisfies the requirements of justice.

These descriptions support three classic models of Christ's work: that of healing,

instructing, and satisfying justice. It is not my intention to claim that these are the only

three models of Christ's work found in early Christian writings. Rather, these three

provide valuable insight into the debates over Christ's *ousia*.[36] Having identified these

three models or metaphors in a few lines from one early theologian, we will now turn to

how this work relates to the question of what Christ can be said to be.

Beginning with the model of curing or healing humanity, Athanasius argues that

once corruption had set in, it could only be cured by one of an incorruptible nature. To

use a modern analogy, the Word's incorruptible nature functioned like an antibiotic for

corruption, wiping out the corruption and mortality while imparting life and incorruption.

Everything that is "from nothing" is changeable, corruptible by nature. Only

something/someone that is from the eternal being of the Father is incorruptible.

Therefore, in order to cure humanity's corruption, the Word became incarnate, that "he

might turn them again toward incorruption, and quicken them from death by the

appropriation of his body and by the grace of the resurrection, banishing death from them

like straw from the fire."[37] Gregory of Nyssa further developed this model using medical

analogies of surgery, antidotes, and transfusions. As he explained, "when death came into

contact with life, darkness with light, corruption with incorruption, the worse of these

things disappeared into a state of nonexistence, to the profit of him who was freed from

these evils."[38] For the incarnation to cure humanity, the life and incorruptibility that

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[36] Notably missing is the metaphor of rescue, prominent in Gregory of Nyssa's work on redemption, which is fascinating but adds little to the discussion of Christ's *ousia*.

[37] Hardy, 63.

[38] Gregory of Nyssa, *Address on Religious Instruction*, in Hardy, 302-304.

belonged to the divine by nature had to be brought into contact with the humanity that was perishing and returning to the nothingness from which it came.

Athanasius' model of Christ's work as instruction involves a similar metaphysical solution, as well as the more pedagogical approach familiar today. According to Athanasius, because human beings were created from nothing and subsequently turned towards corruption, they fail to truly know God. Although created for communion with God, human beings were unable by their own nature to know God even before the Fall, "because while he was uncreate, the creatures had been made of nought, and while he was incorporeal, men had been fashioned in a lower way in the body."[39] In order to overcome this seemingly insurmountable epistemological divide, God made human beings in God's own image, established the works of creation as a way of knowing God, and sent the law, prophets, and holy men to teach human beings about God.[40] Each of these provisions offered an opportunity for human beings to come to know God. However, all of this was of no avail, because human being turned towards corruption, effacing God's image and becoming deaf to God's teaching. In order to overcome this ignorance of God, the Word became incarnate as a human being so that humans who encountered him might come to know God.[41] Although Athanasius did talk about this aspect of salvation pedagogically, comparing the Word to a teacher who makes his lessons simple for simple students, he also cast this mission as something that alters humans at an ontological level. Using the analogy of a portrait that had been effaced, Athanasius argued that the only way that the image of God could be renewed in human

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[39] Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, in Hardy, 65.
[40] Hardy, 65-66.
[41] Hardy, 69.

beings was by the presence of the Word, "For by men's means it was impossible…nor by angels either" but only the very Word of God could renew that image.[42] While Athanasius attached importance to the many ways that the Word did act as revelation and instructor of humanity during the earthly life of Jesus, he also believed that human beings would have been incapable of perceiving this revelation or understanding this instruction if the Word had not restored the image by bringing the nature of God into contact with humanity.

Finally, Athanasius understood the work of the incarnation as satisfaction of the requirements of justice. In addition to giving human beings a portion of the Word's own power in their creation, God also gave humanity a law: "that if they transgressed and turned back, and became evil, they might know that they were incurring that corruption in death which was theirs by nature, no longer to live in paradise, but cast out of it from that time forth, to die and to abide in death and corruption."[43] When human beings did transgress and incurred corruption, justice required that humanity suffer death, "For God would not be true if, when he said we should die, man died not."[44] Nevertheless, Athanasius argued, it would also be unfitting if that which God had made for eternal communion passed away. Humanity had to suffer death in order for God to remain true, but humanity could not pass away without impugning the dignity of its Creator.[45] Therefore, the Word became human and suffered death on behalf of all of humanity, so

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[42] Hardy, 67-68. Irenaeus made a similar argument: "He recapitulated in Himself the long unfolding of humankind, granting salvation by way of compendium, that in Christ Jesus we might receive what we had lost in Adam, namely, to be according to the image and likeness of God." *Against the Heresies, Book 3*, trans. by Dominic J. Unger (New York: Paulist Press, 2002) 87-88.

[43] Hardy, 58.

[44] Hardy, 61. Athanasius repeats this arguments several times: "For it were monstrous, firstly, that God, having spoken, should prove false" (60), "For it were monstrous for God, the father of truth, to appear a liar for our profit and preservation" (61).

[45] Hardy, 62.

that "all being held to have died in him, the law involving the ruin of men might be undone."[46] Only if the Word became human could humanity be held to have died in him, but only by being God could the Word survive death and convey the gift of resurrection to humanity, "banishing death from them like straw from the fire."[47]

This brief examination of Athanasius' arguments sheds light on reasons that the early church was committed to asserting that the Word was of the same *ousia* as the Father. If the Word came from nothing, then like human beings it would be subject to change and corruption. Only the eternal *ousia* of the Father was immune to such corruption and capable of communicating this incorruptibility to created bodies. After the Council of Nicaea and the First Council of Constantinople affirmed that the Son was from the same *ousia* of the Father, christological debates turned to the humanity of the Son. As we saw above, the third model of salvation as the satisfaction of justice clearly required the Word to take on humanity in order to be able to stand in the place of all human beings. The other metaphors of salvation as cure and renewal of God's image also require that the Word be truly human in order for the work of the incarnation to be accomplished. While the divine nature of the Word brought the cure and the image, it was human nature that stood in need of cure and restoration. As Gregory of Nyssa argued, "how could our nature be restored if it was…not this sick creature of earth which was united with the Divine? For a sick man cannot be healed unless the ailing part of him in particular receives the cure."[48] Gregory of Nazianzus further developed this logic against Apollinarian arguments, pointing out that the whole human being stood in need of

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[46] Hardy, 63.
[47] Hardy, 63.
[48] Hardy, 305

cure—body, soul, and mind. Therefore, Jesus had to have a human soul and mind, because "The unassumed is the unhealed, but what is united with God is also being saved."[49] These soteriological commitments were the theological motivations behind the christological proclamations and condemnations of the ecumenical councils.

It should be apparent that this understanding of salvation is governed by a number of anthropocentric assumptions. Although Athanasius' description of the human condition began by acknowledging that, like everything else in creation, human beings came from nothing, he immediately qualified human solidarity with other creatures by insisting that humanity received a unique gift that set our destiny apart from the rest of creation. Second, although there have been dissenting opinions throughout the history of the church, the dominant view of the tradition has always been that the motivation for the incarnation was saving humanity.[50] As Athanasius argued, because of our special origin and destiny it would be unsuitable for God to allow human beings to perish in consequence of our sin. Finally, the tradition has understood sin to have such a strong noetic component that any rectification of sin must be tied to the rationality of the human mind. Because these claims have been shaped by anthropocentric assumptions, we will return to this understanding of salvation in Chapter 5 in order to see what might be retained and what might need to be reconstructed if we approach soteriology from a less anthropocentric perspective. However, these were the assumptions that governed the claims of the ecumenical councils, and we will therefore use this framework in trying to

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[49] Gregory of Nazianzus, "Letter 101: The First Letter to Cledonius the Presbyter," in *On God and Christ: The Five Theological Orations and Two Letters to Cledonius*, trans. by Lionel Wickham and Frederick Williams (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002) 158

[50] See Aquinas's argument that if human beings had not sinned, the incarnation would not have occurred, in ST III.1.3.

understand what is (and is not) required by their christological definitions. Having examined how three models for understanding Christ's work necessitated that Jesus Christ be both God and human, we will now turn to how these soteriological commitments shaped the Trinitarian and christological controversies of the church's first 500 years.

Ousia & Christology

The first ecumenical council at Nicaea deployed the terms *ousia* and *homoousios* in response to Arian arguments that the Son came "from nothing" rather than from the *ousia* of the Father. Arius complained to Eusebius that he was persecuted because he did not concur with the statements, "Always God always Son," "At the same time Father, at the same time Son," "The Son ingenerably coexists with God," "Ever-begotten, ungenerated-created, neither in though nor in some moment of time does God proceed the Son," and "The Son is from God himself."[51] Instead, Arius taught that "The Son has a beginning," and "before he was begotten or created or defined or established, he was not."[52] While the Arian controversy is widely understood to revolve around the eternality or timelessness of the divine, the parties were also disagreeing about how to properly understand the *ousia* of the Son. The issue of whether the Son was co-eternal with the Father implicated questions of the Son's *ousia*.

If there was a "before" when the Son "was not," from what substance did he come? Arius claimed that the Son is "from nothing" because he "is neither part of God nor from any substratum."[53] By this argument, Arius denied that the substance of the Son

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[51] Arius, "Letter to Eusebius of Nicomedia," in *The Trinitarian Controversy*, ed. by William G. Rusch (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980) 29.

[52] Rusch, 30.

[53] Rusch, 30.

could be the same as the substance of God. In his letter to Alexander of Alexandria, Arius tied his opponents' claims that the Son is of the Father's substance to heretical teachings that the Son is an emanation, or an unacceptable division of God's unique oneness.[54] Working from a materialistic perspective, Arius argued that if the Son is of God's substance, then begetting the Son would deplete the Father in some way.[55] The Son could not be of the Father's substance, because, "the Father…did not deprive himself of those things which he has in himself without generation, for he is the source of all."[56]

For Arius, this left only the possibility that the Son's being is "from nothing," deriving its unique properties from God's will rather than from God's *ousia*. The Son is distinguished from the rest of creation as "begotten, not made," but this distinction did not indicate a sharing in the divine *ousia*. Arius's opponents rejected the claim that the Son is from nothing because this would place the Son on par with the rest of the created order, which is also from nothing.[57] These pre-Nicene debates indicate that there were two possible answers to the question of what the Son was, at least on the level of originating substance. The Son could be of the same substance as the Father, or the Son could be "from nothing." Arius opted for the second explanation, that the Son was from nothing.[58]

The Council of Nicaea refused Arius's solution, opting instead for the first explanation: the Son is "from the *ousia* of the Father" and "*homoousios* with the Father."[59] Nicaea further ruled out any possibility that the Son was from any other *ousia*

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[54] Arius, "Letter to Alexander of Alexandria," in Rusch, 31.
[55] Rusch, 32.
[56] Rusch, 31.
[57] See "Letter to Alexander of Thessalonica," in Rusch, 35 & 36, and "The Synodal Letter of the Council of Antioch, A.D. 325," in Rusch, 47.
[58] Arius, "Letter to Alexander of Alexandria," in Rusch, 31.
[59] Tanner, 5.

than the Father's, anathematizing "those who say that he came into being from things that were not, or from another *hypostasis* or *ousia*, affirming that the Son of God is subject to change or alteration."[60] Eusebius of Caesarea later explained the meaning of "*homoousios* with the Father," saying that this clause "indicates that the Son of God bears no resemblance to originate creatures but that he is alike in every way only to the Father who has begotten and that he is not from any other *hypostasis* and substance but from the Father."[61]

Considering the controversies that led to the Council of Nicaea, we can see that they used *ousia* to indicate a broad category related to the origin of being. The Council insisted that the only possible *ousiai* from which the Son could come are that of the Father or that of everything that was created from nothing. This insistence reflects the Christian assumption that there is an ontological divide between the divine and everything else. For Nicaea, there are fundamentally only two *ousiai*: that of both the Father and the Son, and that of all that was created by the Father through the Son.[62] They clearly insisted that the Son's *ousia* is divine: "God from God, light from light, true God from true God."[63] This divine *ousia* is contrasted with everything that is created, those things in heaven and earth that came into existence only through the Son. This understanding of reality leaves no room for a third, intermediate, *ousia*. Soteriologically, the claim that the Son is from the *ousia* of the Father guarantees that the Son possesses the incorruptibility, the perfect image, the immortality, and the true knowledge of God

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[60] Tanner, 5.

[61] Eusebius of Caesarea, "Letter to His Church," in Rusch, 59.

[62] For the purposes of this project, we do not need to delve into the debates that led to the Spirit's inclusion in the *ousia* of the Father and the Son.

[63] Tanner, 5.

that human beings needed. It was left to later councils to establish how, at the level of substance, the Son was able to bring these gifts to human beings.

The Human "Physis" of Christ

While anthropocentric concerns about the salvation of human beings shaped Nicaea's affirmation that the Son is *homoousios* with the Father, the debates that followed Nicaea were even more deeply influenced by assumptions of human exceptionality. While Nicaea affirmed that the Word, *homoousios* with the Father, "came down and became incarnate," later debates centered on the human particularity of this incarnation.[64] The Apollinarian argument that Jesus did not have a human intellect and was therefore, "not a human being…since he is not coessential with humanity in his highest part," threatened human exceptionalism by implying that the incarnation could be effective for human beings even if it did not include the assumption of a human intellect.[65] As was discussed above, Gregory of Nazianzus summed up the rejection of this position with his argument that, "What is unassumed is unhealed."[66] If the Word did not assume a particularly *human* mind, then the human mind could not be cured through the incarnation. Because the entire human being stood in need of a cure, the incarnation must include everything that makes a human being human. To understand how this relates to assumptions of human exceptionalism, we need to first examine how early theologians understood humanity in relation to other beings.

When early Christians found that they needed a definition of human nature for the christological debates, they already had a large philosophical tradition from which to

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[64] Tanner, 5.

[65] Apollinaris of Laodicea, "Fragment 69," in Richard A. Norris, ed., *The Christological Controversy*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980) 109.

[66] Gregory of Nazianzus, 158.

draw. Aristotle had defined a human being as a living organism that is a featherless biped, possesses a sense of humor, is shaped by political instincts, has a capacity for recollection, and is rational.[67] Each of these definitions describes a characteristic that was assumed to set human beings apart from all other species, but rationality in particular has been used define human nature for millennia. In *De Anima*, Aristotle divided orders of material existence on the basis of whether a material body had a soul and what type of soul that body had. Inanimate material bodies (such as rocks) were differentiated from animate bodies because only the latter possessed a soul (*anima*).[68] Aristotle further distinguished between living bodies on the basis of how many of the five powers of the soul they possessed. These powers were "the nutritive, the appetitive, the sensory, the locomotive, and the power of thinking."[69] While plants had only the nutritive power, animals had nutritive, appetitive, sensory, and locomotive powers. Only human beings and "possibly another order like man or superior to him" had the power of thinking in addition to the other four powers.[70] This hierarchy of being was baptized in Christian understandings of the *imago dei*, in which the scriptural claim that "God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them," was understood to indicate that only human beings possessed some characteristic that resembled God—most frequently assumed to be rationality.[71] In the

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[67] Howard P. Kainz, *The Philosophy of Human Nature* (Chicago: Open Court, 2008) 4-5.

[68] Aristotle, *On the Soul* 413a20-22, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, 557.

[69] Aristotle, *On the Soul*, 413a30-31, 559.

[70] Aristotle, *On the Soul*, 414b1-20, 559-560.

[71] Genesis 1:27. Christians have generally interpreted this claim exclusively, as indicating that nothing but humanity was made in the image of God. While I have no argument that the authors of this text had anything but such an anthropocentric claim in mind, I would like to point out that the text itself does not actually say that. It does say that humanity is created in the image of God, it does not say that anything else is not.

13th century we find this interpretation governing Aquinas's argument that humanity alone is made in the image of God,

> Now it is manifest that specific likeness follows the ultimate difference. But some things are like to <u>God</u> first and most commonly because they <u>exist</u>; secondly, because they live; and thirdly because they <u>know</u> or understand; and these last, as <u>Augustine</u> says (QQ. 83, qu. 51) "approach so near to <u>God</u> in likeness, that among all creatures nothing comes nearer to Him." *It is clear, therefore, that <u>intellectual</u> creatures alone, properly speaking, are made to <u>God's</u> image*.[72]

Not only did the assumed distinctiveness of human rationality shape theological anthropology, it also played a significant role in the christological debates. While plants possessed nutritive or vegetative souls, and animals possessed sensitive souls, among material creatures human beings alone possessed rational souls.[73]

We can see that the understanding of human nature defined as a material body with a rational soul was generally accepted by the fifth century in Cyril's use of an analogy to human nature to explain the incarnation. Analogies are useful tools for explaining something more mysterious in terms of its similarities to something that is more familiar or easier to understand, but analogical explanation is only helpful if one's interlocutors are already familiar with one part of the analogy. As Cyril explained, "A human being like ourselves cannot properly be divided into two *prosopa*, even though he is regarded as consisting of a soul and a body, but in a single human being with a single identity. The same is also true with regard to Emmanuel…his *prosopon* is necessarily single."[74] He used the same analogy, arguing that a murderer who kills one person cannot be convicted of two murders, "even though that one person [killed] is perhaps conceived

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[72] ST, I.93.2, emphasis added.
[73] See Aquinas' comments on Aristotle, in ST I.78.2.
[74] Cyril of Alexandria, *A Explanation of The Twelve Chapters*, in *Cyril of Alexandria*, ed. by Norman Russell (London: Routledge, 2000) 182.

of as being from soul and body and the nature of the component parts is not the same but different."[75] If Cyril could use the union of body and soul in a human being to explain the mystery of the incarnation, then this understanding of human nature had to be generally known.

Cyril's assumption that human nature included both body and soul also lies behind his insistence that the Word assumed both a body and a rational soul.[76] Echoing Gregory of Nazianzus' soteriological concerns, Cyril cautioned that "If he had not…partaken of the same elements as we do, he would not have delivered human nature from the fault we incurred in Adam, nor would he have warded off the decay from our bodies, nor would he have brought to an end the power of the curse."[77] According to this line of reasoning, there is something ontologically distinctive about the rational souls of human beings, such that the assumption of a material body without the assumption of a rational soul would not have been able to cure humanity completely.

This is why the Council of Ephesus expanded the christological definition offered by Nicaea and Constantinople I, adding that Jesus Christ is "Perfect man *of a rational soul* and a body."[78] The Council of Chalcedon kept this addition, specifying that Jesus Christ is "perfect in humanity…truly man, *of a rational soul* and a body…*like us in all respects* except for sin."[79] While the ecumenical councils used *ousia* to indicate the broadest category of being, they became quite specific about Christ's humanity, defining it at the level of *infima species*. They defined true humanity in a way that highlighted

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[75] Cyril, *Against Nestorius*, in *Cyril of Alexandria*, 150.
[76] Cyril, *Against Nestorius*, 142.
[77] *Against Nestorius*, 134.
[78] Tanner, 69.
[79] Tanner, 86, emphasis added.

what they assumed was the unique characteristic of human beings: the rational soul. We have seen that the soteriological concerns underlying christological claims required that Jesus Christ assume all that needs curing in human beings. This shaped the ecumenical councils' inclusion of both a body and rational soul in later christological definitions. We have also seen that Chaldedon's use of two *ousiai* creates an inclusive category of created reality on the one hand, and of divinity on the other. However, those who wrote the Chalcedonian definition understood nature to indicate something more exclusive, a principle that distinguished each species from the others. This constitutes a difficulty when it comes to interpreting their claims about the two natures inclusively. In order to understand how the two *ousiai* can be used to counter the anthropocentrism of the two natures, we will now turn to the theological significance of the two *ousiai* formulation, and critiques raised against other interpretations that essentialize one particularity of Christ's created being. We do this in order to identify resources for reconstructing the councils' claims in light of modern scientific insights, the task of the next two chapters.

Two Ousiai

To sum up our discussion thus far, the earliest ecumenical statements about the person of Christ focused on his divinity—that he was "from the *ousia* of the Father" and "*homoousios* with the Father."[80] The debates that led up to Nicaea indicate that these pronouncements stem from a belief that there are at bottom only two *ousiai*—that of the Father (and the Son), and that of all that is created by the Father (through the Son). Later christological debates shifted their emphasis from the Son's divinity to his humanity, focusing on what was entailed by the claim that he "came down and became incarnate."[81]

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[80] Tanner, 5.
[81] Tanner, 5.

Assumptions of human exceptionalism shaped the idea that human nature is defined as body and rational soul in distinction from all other created beings—other material bodies were assumed to lack rational souls, and angels were understood to lack bodies. Soteriological concerns demanded that whatever the Word assumed had to be everything that stood in need of divine cure. Because human nature was assumed to have two components, this required that the Word specifically assume both a human body and a rational soul. In this section, we will first examine the theological contributions of the councils' commitment to two *ousiai*, and then examine some of the difficulties created by emphasis on a particular characteristic of Jesus.

Theological Contributions of "Two Ousiai"

Nicaea's two *ousiai* framework undercuts human exceptionalism in three ways. It affirms an ontological distinction between the divine and human beings, establishes human solidarity with the rest of creation, and specifies how the incarnation can be effective for all of creation without human mediation. Turning first to the ontological divide between human beings and the divine, the Arian controversy established that there were fundamentally only two *ousiai* in all of reality—that of God, and that of all that God creates. Human beings are created by God, but they are not from the *ousia* of God. This claim pushes against pantheistic claims that everything partakes of the divine, while simultaneously asserting that all things are immediately dependent upon God as their Creator. Because everything that is not of God's *ousia* is from nothing, by nature it would return to nothing but for God's creative providence. This claim also guards against human exceptionalism's tendency to slide into idolatry that would elevate human beings above the rest of creation, effectively trying to "play God" towards the rest of creation.

Alexander of Alexandria was concerned that a different understanding of *ousia* would result in such an improper elevation of human nature, as can be seen in his characterization of Arian arguments that the Son "does not have by nature something special from other sons (for they say that no one is by nature Son of God), nor does he have some distinctive property in relation to God, but he…was chosen."[82] This adoptionist theory both takes away from the Son's unique dignity and opens the way for that dignity to be bestowed upon other human beings, as Alexander observed, "The wretches state, 'Then we too are able to become sons of God, just as he.'"[83] In contrast, Alexander argued that "our Lord, being Son of the Father by nature, is worshipped," and that human beings "become sons by adoption being shown a kindness by the Son."[84] The distinction of all of reality into two *ousiai*, coupled with the claim that the Son is *homoousios* with the Father while we are not, defends against human exceptionalism that could eliminate the necessity of the Son for salvation.

This affirmation of the ontological divide between human beings and God undermines human exceptionalism by positioning human beings in solidarity with the rest of creation. Gregory of Nyssa made this argument against human exceptionalism in support of his claim that Christ was born through normal human processes. Against those who "despise the method of human birth as something shameful and disgraceful," Gregory argued that evil alone is truly "unworthy of God."[85] In contrast to those that would argue that the incarnation as an earthly creature was unworthy of God, he explained that

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[82] "Letter to Alexander of Thessalonica," in Rusch, 35.
[83] Rusch, 35.
[84] Rusch, 39.
[85] "Address on Religious Instruction," in Hardy, 305.

> Every created thing is equally inferior to the Most High who, by reason of his transcendent nature, is unapproachable. The whole universe is uniformly beneath his dignity. For what is totally inaccessible is not accessible to one thing and inaccessible to another. Rather does it transcend all existing things in equal degree. Earth is not more below his dignity, and heaven less. Nor do the creatures inhabiting each of these elements differ in this respect…Everything is equally beneath the power that rules the universe…If, then, everything equally falls short of this dignity, the one thing which really befits God's nature still remains, namely, to come to the aid of those in need.[86]

While Gregory was specifically defending the human birth of Christ as something that is no less worthy of God than his incarnation as a human being, the logic of his argument clearly undermines human exceptionalism that holds that human beings are more worthy of the incarnation than other created bodies would be. According to this argument, angels are not more worthy of being the recipients of the Word than are human beings, but by the same logic human beings are not more worthy than are frogs or field mice. Nicaea's insistence that there are two *ousiai* not only establishes an ontological distinction between God and everything else, but also undermines human hubris by placing humanity firmly on the "everything else" side of that distinction.

Finally, this claim of two *ousiai* undermines the anthropocentric tendency of many theologians to view the salvation of other material bodies as dependent upon human nature to mediate that salvation. This anthropocentric approach is supported by scriptural passages that seem to imply that the fate of all of creation depends on human salvation (e.g., Rom 8:19-21).[87] In contrast, some theologians have turned to passages that may indicate the incarnation was for all of creation, rather than only for human

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[86] Hardy, 305-306.

[87] "For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (Rom 8:19-21)

beings (e.g., John 1:14 and Col 1:20).[88] The ecumenical councils asserted that the Son

was *homoousios* with the Father because only that *ousia* possessed the cure for the

ailments of creatures who came "from nothing." They also insisted that Jesus Christ was

homoousios with us because only the union of the two *ousiai* could bring the cure to

those who were perishing. However, if there are only two *ousiai*, this means our *ousia* is

the same *ousia* as everything else that was created from nothing. If the incarnation affects

human beings because the divine *ousia* is hypostatically united with created *ousia*, then it

should affect all created beings equally. We will explore this issue in greater depth in

Chapter 5. While the ecumenical councils' arguments for two *ousiai* undermine

anthropocentric assumptions, their later emphasis on Christ's humanity has been used to

bolster human exceptionalism. To see how Christians have resolved a similar tension

before, we will now turn to feminist critiques of androcentric interpretation that (over)

emphasized the maleness of Christ.

Feminist Critiques of Essentialized Maleness

While the human nature that the ecumenical councils claimed the Word assumed

in Jesus Christ was described in sexually generic terms, the androcentric biases of the

culture in which they made this claim assumed that his maleness was essential to the

incarnation. As Rosemary Radford Ruether explains, this was due to an erroneous

biological assumption that,

> The male alone provided the seed or genetic form of the child, while the female
> provided only the material substratum which was formed. Since the seed from the

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[88] "The Word became flesh and lived among us," emphasizing the *sarx* of the incarnation, rather than its particularity as human flesh (John 1:14). The author of Colossians alleges that "through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven" (Col 1:20). For development of these themes, see Niels Henrik Gregersen, "Deep Incarnation and *Kenosis*: In, With, Under, and As: A Response to Ted Peters," *Dialog* 52, no. 3 (Fall 2013): 251-262; and Elizabeth A. Johnson, "Jesus and the Cosmos: Soundings in Deep Christology," in *Incarnation: On the Scope and Depth of Christology*, ed. Niels Henrik Gregersen (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015) 133-156.

father is male, a fully-formed offspring would also be male. Females are the result of a defect in gestation by which the maternal matter is not fully formed, and so a female, or 'defective' male, is produced who is inferior in body, intelligence, and in moral self-control.[89]

Therefore, the seemingly gender-neutral assertion that Christ is perfect (hu)man (*anthropon teleion*), is actually an assertion of Christ's maleness, when read in light of the reigning scientific beliefs of the time. Furthermore, "Since rationality was presumed by these patriarchal cultures to be normatively male, all the theological reference points for defining Christ were defined androcentrically."[90] Regarding the image of God, Ruether notes that some early theologians read Genesis 1:27-28 to indicate that the image was not limited to either gender, but that, "most of the Church fathers concluded that it was the male who possessed the image of God normatively, whereas women in themselves did not possess the image of God, but rather were the image of the body, or lower creation, which man was given to rule over."[91] As we discussed in Chapter 1, the same androcentric assumptions that essentialized the maleness of Christ in turn used that maleness to bolster patriarchal hierarchies. The idea that the maleness of Christ was essential to the incarnation has been used to give theological validation to household hierarchies that subordinate women to men, to exclude women from ordained ministry, and to attenuate the efficacy of the incarnation for women.

Here we should note that this emphasis on one particular characteristic of the incarnation, Christ's maleness, works against the theological benefits gained by the ecumenical councils' claim of two *ousiai*. While recognition that all of reality partakes of

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[89] Rosemary Radford Ruether, "The Liberation of Christology from Patriarchy," *Religion and Intellectual Life* 2, no. 3 (Spring, 1985), 118.
[90] Ruether, 117.
[91] Ruether, 117-118.

only two *ousiai* upholds an ontological distinction between God and men, androcentric emphasis on the maleness of Christ asserted a "necessary ontological connection" between the male person of Christ and the divine nature.[92] At the same time, this essentializing of Christ's maleness erodes the solidarity of the sexes in their common nature, created in the image of God. Feminist critics point out that the traditional christological language of Logos/Word reflects this division, since Logos "was particularly related to the rational principle," and rationality was considered a masculine quality lacking in women.[93] Gregory of Nyssa's argument that all parts of creation are equally unworthy of the incarnation is quickly lost in arguments that men are more truly the image of God than are women.[94] As Johnson notes, while the ecumenical councils explicitly assert that the hypostatic union is unconfused, "still the androcentric imagination occasions a certain leakage of Jesus' human maleness into the divine nature, so that maleness appears to be of the essence of the God made known in Christ."[95] These androcentric assumptions simultaneously undercut the solidarity of the sexes in their common humanity and degrade women to a second-class citizenship in the realm of human beings.

In addition to setting men apart from women and elevating men above the rest of the created order (including human women) by virtue of their rational resemblance to God, essentializing the maleness of Christ supports an idolatrous overreaching in which men are needed to mediate salvation to women. While the church has never excluded

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[92] Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992) 165.

[93] Ruether, 116-117. See also Johnson, "If Jesus is a man, so uncritical reasoning goes…then this must point to maleness as an essential characteristic of divine being itself…an affinity between maleness and divinity," 152.

[94] See Augustine, *De Trinitate*, XII.7.9-10; Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I.93.4, reply to objection 1.

[95] Johnson, 152.

women from salvation altogether, its androcentric anthropology, reinforced by essentialized views of the maleness of Christ, have made male human beings the mediators of that salvation—specifically through a priesthood that excludes women, and more generally through the role of male family members as the "head" of women.[96] This perspective is supported by scriptural passages like 1 Corinthians 11:3: "I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the husband is the head of his wife, and God is the head of Christ," which uses a man-as-microcosm argument to justify the veiling of women in worship. Now that prior biological errors have been corrected, women are understood to be fully human rather than imperfectly formed men, and more egalitarian worldviews recognizing the full humanity of women are dominant, any continued emphasis on the maleness of Christ actually threatens claims about his soteriological significance for women. Johnson observes that "if maleness is essential for the christic role, then women are cut out of the loop of salvation, for female sexuality is not taken on by the Word made flesh."[97] If Jesus Christ saves women, then his maleness cannot be a soteriologically significant characteristic of the incarnation.

While some find these problems with the incarnation insurmountable, feminist Christians have approached the issue by simultaneously affirming the maleness of the person Jesus Christ and understanding that maleness as no more essential to the incarnation than his ethnicity, height, or hair color. Ruether argues that, "what is necessary is not a further evacuation of his particularity. Rather, we need a fuller ability to accept his particularity, without confusing one aspect of that particularity, his

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[96] See Ruether, 118; Johnson, 153.

[97] Johnson, 153. See also Ruether, 119: "Today a Christology which elevated Jesus' maleness to ontologically necessary significance suggests that Jesus' humanity does not represent women at all. Incarnation solely into the male sex does not include women and so women are not redeemed."

maleness, with the essence of Christ as God's word incarnate."[98] This is not a radical

step, as "What we find in most Christology is an effort to dissolve most aspects of Jesus'

particularity (his Jewishness, as a first-century messianic Galilean) in order to make him

the symbol of universal humanity."[99] To address the inappropriate emphasis that has been

placed on Jesus's maleness, we need to understand his maleness in the same way that we

understand all of his other particular characteristics. It is a part of his unique constitution

as an individual material body, but it is not a barrier to his universal significance. Johnson

demonstrates how to uphold Jesus's particularities, while arguing against essentializing

any of his human characteristics:

> The fact that Jesus of Nazareth was a male human being is not in question, nor, in
> a more just church, would it even be an issue. Jesus' maleness is a constitutive
> element of his identity, part of the perfection and limitation of his historical
> contingency, and as such is to be respected. It is as intrinsic to his historical
> person as his familial, ethnic, religious, linguistic, and cultural particularity, his
> Galilean village roots, and so forth.[100]

This particularity, however, needs to be understood using "a multipolar anthropology,"

that uses "interdependence of difference as a primary category, rather than emphasizing

sexuality in an ideological, distorted way."[101] This then allows the church to affirm the

particularity of Jesus' maleness while not viewing it as "theologically determinative of

his identity as the Christ nor normative for the identity of the Christian community."[102]

Johnson and Ruether respond to patriarchal assumptions about the maleness of Christ by

emphasizing the common human nature assumed by the Word—particularized by all of

the characteristics that any individual instantiation of that nature would have.

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[98] Ruether, 127.
[99] Ruether, 127.
[100] Johnson, 151-152.
[101] Johnson, 156.
[102] Johnson, 156.

The point I want to draw from this examination is that when implicit biases overemphasized the maleness of the incarnation and treated that maleness as though it were essential to the salvific work of the incarnation, feminist theologians developed an effective method for correcting the distortion. They emphasized the categorical level that is not defined by that distinction, in this case turning from the category of male human being to the broader category of generic humanity. We will be exploring the efficacy such an approach towards anthropocentric distortions in the next two chapters.

Ecomimetic Resistance: Modern Cosmology, Evolutionary Biology, & the Problem of "Natures"

As Ruether pointed out, the androcentric worldview that prioritized the maleness of Christ was based on mistaken biological assumptions about human reproduction and gender. The anthropocentric worldview that prioritized the humanity of Christ was also based on mistaken biological assumptions about the fixity of species and the origin of life. Although there have been other minority views throughout history, until Darwin's theory of natural selection was accepted, "species of organisms were deemed to be as timeless as the perfect triangles and circles of Euclidean geometry" by the vast majority of theologians, philosophers, and even naturalists.[103] In contrast, Darwin offered an explanation of how contemporary species could have arisen from preceding generations:

> If…organic beings vary at all in the several parts of their organization, and I think this cannot be disputed; if there be…at some age, season, or year, a severe struggle for life, and this certainly cannot be disputed…if variations useful to any organic being do occur, assuredly individuals thus characterized will have the best chance of being preserved in the struggle for life; and from the strong principle of inheritance they will tend to produce offspring similarly characterized. This

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[103] Dennett, 36 & 38.

principle of preservation, I have called, for the sake of brevity, Natural Selection.[104]

While Darwin did not know the genetic mechanism by which characteristics are passed along from parents to offspring, his theory was able to explain how species could both come into existence and go extinct in response to competition for resources. There continue to be debates over the details of such evolution: whether it proceeds by the gradual and more or less continuous accumulation of small changes (the Modern Synthesis) or by rapid periods of speciation interspersed in long time periods with very little change (Punctuated Equilibrium); how natural selection works at the level of kinship groups, individual organisms, and species; the roles of genes themselves and of environmental factors in causing genetic changes; and the role of nonadaptive, or neutral mutations.[105] Despite these debates, the modern scientific community accepts that our modern species evolved from the first life forms, with creatures of greater complexity descending from simpler life forms.[106]

This does not just undermine the notion of eternally fixed species, it destroys it. According to Platonic essentialism, the category of *infima species* correlates to the intelligible Form of that species, with each individual being reflecting that Form imperfectly. The Form was the ideal from which every physical manifestation fell short. In contrast, today a species can be defined as a population the can produce fertile

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[104] Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or The Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* (London: John Murray, 1859), 127 from Darwin Online, http://darwin-online.org.uk/content/frameset?itemID=F373&viewtype=text&pageseq=1, accessed January 7, 2017.

[105] For a summary of these debates, see Ian G. Barbour, *Religion and Science: Historical and Contemporary Issues* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1997) 223-225.

[106] See Dennett, 85-103, for a discussion of this "Tree of Life."

offspring through interbreeding.[107] There is no ideal to which we can compare an

individual being to decide whether it belongs in a species or not; the actual physical and

mental attributes of individual members of the species may vary widely.[108] We now have

evidence of historically recent speciation, in which genetic isolation and environmental

pressures combine to lead to the evolution of two or more species from one common

ancestral species. One particularly interesting challenge to the notion of fixed species can

be found in the genus of herring gulls, or *Larus*:

> As we look at the herring gull, moving westwards from Great Britain to North America, we see gulls that are recognizably herring gulls, although they are a little different from the British form. We can follow them, as their appearance gradually changes, as far as Siberia. At about this point in the continuum, the gull looks more like the form that in Great Britain is called the lesser black-backed gull. From Siberia, across Russia, to northern Europe, the gull gradually changes to look more and more like the British lesser black-backed gull. Finally, in Europe, the ring is complete; the two geographically extreme forms meet, to form two perfectly good species: the herring and lesser black-backed gull can be both distinguished by their appearance and do not naturally interbreed.[109]

Under different pressures, variations within a species can become differences of species.

Although it is true that human beings are, generally, rational, featherless bipeds that live

in communities and have the ability to laugh, there are certainly human beings with one

or no legs, human beings that live in isolation from others, and human beings that lack a

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[107] Though serviceable in the present context, this definition may be too broad. Dennett raises this issue in regards to wolves, coyotes, and dogs, which "are considered to be different species, and yet interbreeding does occur, and—unlike mules, the offspring of horse and donkey—their offspring are not in general sterile," 45.

[108] The species distinction, ostensibly based on genetic variations, can be contrasted with the nominal distinctions of breeds, which do allow for comparison to a standard to determine whether an individual can be considered of that breed or not. Breeds are categories created by human beings who define the breed by those characteristics they deem appropriate to the breed, and exclude those individuals that do not meet their definitional criteria. This model fits with pre-modern understandings of the relationship between species and natures, but no one today is under an illusion that the height and other limitations specified by the AKC for Chihuahuas is related to some eternally-determined Form of ideal Chihuahua-ness.

[109] Mark Ridley, *The Problems of Evolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985) 5, cited by Dennett, 45. See also Ernst Mayr, *Systematics and the Origin of Species: From the Viewpoint of a Zoologist* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1964).

sense of humor, all without being expelled from the species of *Homo sapiens*. The herring gull, however, managed to diverge into two (to six) different species by circumnavigating the globe, and undergoing some minor physical alterations along the way. Species is a useful taxonomy for the study of living creatures, and (especially if some version of Punctuated Equilibrium is vindicated) the stability of species over time suggests the category is not without ontological significance; but it does not seem to indicate any sort of ultimate ontological distinction between different categories of living beings.

Evolution is not the only scientific development that challenges pre-modern understandings of species as governed by some eternal nature. Microbiology reveals that the individuals we perceive are actually ecological communities, composed of a multitude of different species. Of the nearly 70 trillion cells that make up an average human being, over half are genetically-separate bacteria, eukaryotes, and viruses.[110] Research indicates that the human microbiome plays a "vital role in maintaining host health and has a profound effect on human diseases."[111] The make-up of our microbiota is influenced by human genetics, antibiotic use, and diet, but in turn it wields a great deal of influence over us as well.[112] Found throughout the body, these other-than-human creatures are responsible for human immune development, they play a significant role in extracting nutrition from the foods that human beings consume, and they have even been

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[110] Sender, Fuchs, and Milo, "Revised Estimates for the Number of Human and Bacteria Cells in the Body." (2016) *PLoS Biology* 14, no 8 (August 19, 2016): 1-14. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOHost (accessed January 17, 2017).

[111] Xu, Xiaofei, Zhujun Wang, and Xuewu Zhang. "The human microbiota associated with overall health." *Critical Reviews In Biotechnology* 35, no. 1 (March 2015): 129-140. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCO*host* (accessed January 17, 2017).

[112] Xu, et al., 129-132.

found to influence mood.[113] The abilities of the human body to digest food and fight off

disease is as much a product of the other species we play host to as it is to our own

species- natures. In addition to sharing a common ancestry with every other living

creatures on earth through evolution, human beings are actually communities of trillions

of different organisms. Recognition of this fact about ourselves just might enable us to re-

evaluate our judgments about other-than-human species that exercise abilities through

symbiotic cooperation with other creatures as well.[114]

Not only biology, but also contemporary work in physical cosmology underscores

the common origin and physical interdependence of everything that exists. According to

the Big Bang theory, the universe has been expanding "from a common origin about

fifteen billion years ago."[115] Everything in the universe is subject to the same natural laws

or physical forces.[116] As with evolution, there continues to be debate about the Big Bang

theory, particularly over the ultimate fate of the universe. Nevertheless, the evidence

indicates that the entire universe shares a common origin in the distant past. As Ian G.

Barbour explains,

> Cosmology joins evolutionary biology, molecular biology, and ecology in
> showing the interdependence of all things. We are part of an ongoing community
> of being; we are kin to all creatures, past and present. From astrophysics we know
> about our indebtedness to a common legacy of physical events. The chemical

[113] Xu, et al., 132-136.

[114] One example of such cross-species cooperation that challenges traditional notions about the capacities of the species involved can be seen in the way that trees in forests make use of soil fungal networks in order to both communicate with one another and share resources. This finding challenges long-standing assumptions that plants do not have the ability to communicate, and certainly not to form any kind of social alliances. See Nic Fleming, "Plants talk to each other using an internet of fungus," bbc.com, http://www.bbc.com/earth/story/20141111-plants-have-a-hidden-internet (accessed January 14, 2017).

[115] Barbour, 195-196.

[116] Barbour describes the four basic physical forces: "(1) the electromagnetic force responsible for light and the behavior of charged particles; (2) the weak nuclear force responsible for radioactive decay; (3) the strong nuclear force that binds protons and neutrons into nuclei; and (4) the gravitational force evident in the long-distance attraction between masses," 196.

elements in your hand and in your brain were forged in the furnaces of stars. The cosmos is all of a piece.[117]

It seems that both the Big Bang theory and the theory of evolution support the implied claims of the ecumenical councils that all material reality shares a common *ousia*, even while they undermine notions of a fixed and ontologically distinct nature possessed by humanity alone in all of creation.

Whether we focus on the materials out of which we are made, the origin from which we arose, or the forces that govern our forms, we find deep similarities between human beings and every other material body that exists. As we have learned, all living creatures can trace their genealogy back to the earliest, simplest life forms to emerge. Even beyond that, there are material bodies including viruses, proteins, and individual amino acids that seem to stand at the transition from the living to the non-living universe, exhibiting similarities to both. The anti-reductionist school of organicism understands life as "a type of organization and activity, not a separate nonmaterial entity or substance," claiming that, "There is no impassable gulf between the living and nonliving (either in evolutionary history or among present forms), but rather a continuity of interdependent levels."[118] The picture of the universe, material existence, and the development of life that the physical sciences have given us at the beginning of the 21st century coheres nicely with implications of the two *ousiai* claim of Nicaea—every material body is of the same *ousia*.

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[117] Barbour, 215.
[118] Barbour, 233.

<u>Conclusion</u>

In this chapter, we have explored the claims of the ecumenical councils regarding the two *ousiai* of the incarnation, along with the soteriological concerns that governed those claims. We have found that the councils used the term *ousia* to indicate a broad category of being determined by the origin. According to their usage, there are only two *ousiai* in all of reality: that of the Creator God, and that of creation. This determination resists human exceptionalism by affirming the absolute qualitative distinction between God and humanity and also affirming human solidarity with all other created beings. However, we have also seen that anthropocentric assumptions about the constitution of human nature influenced conciliar definitions of the humanity of Christ, leading them to emphasize his possession of a particularly rational soul. We also learned how feminist theologians have responded constructively to androcentric distortions that improperly emphasized the maleness of Jesus by placing soteriological significance on the more inclusive category of humanity instead of the exclusive category of male humanity. Finally, we explored how contemporary scientific understandings of both biology and cosmology challenge the pre-modern idea that species are eternally fixed categories governed by timeless natures. In the next chapter, I will bring these last two points together to offer an ecomimetic response to the human exceptionalism embedded in christologies.

4

Truly Created, Truly Creator

Although the christological definitions advanced by the early ecumenical councils were themselves shaped by anthropocentric assumptions, we have seen that they also provide resources for challenging anthropocentrism. In this chapter, I will build on these resources to develop a christological reconstruction that emphasizes the Word's assumption of created *ousia* (rather than of a specifically *human* nature) in order to see how this approach contributes to debates about the coherence of the incarnation. I will first examine how we might understand created *ousia* by undertaking an ecomimetic examination of that concept from several non-human perspectives. Next, I will use that examination to revisit classical lists of divine attributes in order to see how ecomimetic perspectives might challenge anthropomorphic understandings of the divine. Finally, I will use this revised understanding of created and divine *ousia* to reexamine debates over the coherence of how Jesus could be simultaneously creature and Creator.

Created *Ousia*

Just as feminist challenges to the theological significance of Jesus's maleness did not deny his maleness, my emphasis on the importance of the created *ousia* assumed in the incarnation does not deny that Jesus was truly human. As we saw in the last chapter, however, there are biological and cosmological reasons to question the usefulness of "human nature" (or any other species-nature) as a category of ultimate significance, whether biological or theological. Both the commonalities across species lines and the differences between individuals within a given species undermine the idea that created natures can be clearly defined. The more that we learn about physical, biological,

intellectual, emotional, and moral continuities across species, the more difficult it becomes to define a threshold at which something can be said to possess a "rational soul" as opposed to a merely animal one, or an animal soul as opposed to a merely vegetative one. Furthermore, if theological value is based upon one's status as a beloved creation of God, then even the traditional division between animate and inanimate creations may not carry the significance it has historically been afforded.

As we saw in the first chapter, human-as-microcosm soteriological models find commonalities between humans and other creatures across all levels of existence, but they do so by starting with human experience, and assuming that all other material existence is recapitulated in humanity.[1] As a result, this focus prioritizes characteristics and categories that support notions of human superiority—intelligence over feeling, feeling over non-sentient life, life over "mere" existence. An ecomimetic investigation of the commonalities that define created *ousia* cannot start with such privileging of human characteristics. Instead, it will examine a number of different creatures in their own ways of being in order to develop a provisional understanding of created *ousia*. However, because anthropocentric biases are implicit and deeply ingrained, similar concerns will undoubtedly distort this attempt to identify the common *ousia* of created bodies as well. In order to resist these biases as much as possible, our ecomimetic examination will invert traditional anthropocentric hierarchies by starting with inanimate bodies, then examining the life of a plant, engaging "irrational" animals next, and finally turning to animals that are widely recognized to be "intelligent." This examination consists of first specifying the creature to be examined, and then developing a description of that creature

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[1] Bauckham, 36-38.

from a variety of sources. This is followed by a reflection on what the creature in question seems to contribute to an understanding of created *ousia*. While not all of the facts cataloged in the descriptions are incorporated into the provisional definition of created *ousia*, they are included in order to foster the kind of attention to other material bodies in their particularities that is necessary for ecomimetic interpretation to challenge anthropocentric perspectives.

Inanimate material bodies

We will begin this examination with those material bodies considered the furthest removed from human beings—inanimate bodies. Of course, "inanimate" is not a very specific description—the sheer volume of different material bodies that fall into this category (and with which we might engage) is overwhelming. One of the benefits of adopting an ecomimetic approach is that it forces the interpreter to move beyond the overgeneralizations that are involved in any system of categorization and recognize the dizzying array of unique bodies that have been unceremoniously lumped together as "other-than-human." We must engage a specific type of material body. We can first narrow the category of inanimate bodies to the more specific category of rocks, but even there we find many different categories based on the processes that originally formed the stones, their current properties, and even their rarity or current usefulness. In order to narrow the category even further, we will focus our inquiry on biological limestone, a particular type of sedimentary rock made up of "at least 50% calcium carbonate in the form of calcite by weight" and originating from marine life forms.[2]

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[2] "Limestone: What is Limestone and How is it Used?" at http://geology.com/rocks/limestone.shtml. Accessed March 5, 2017, and Asher Shadmon, *Stone in Israel*, (Jerusalem: State of Israel Ministry of Development Natural Resource Research Organization, 1972) 28.

Such biological limestone forms when deceased plankton, foraminifera, and the fragments of shells are deposited on the sea floor. Once there, time, pressure, and further layers of sediment work together to consolidate them into limestone.[3] This means that biological limestone begins—if it can be said to have a beginning—as a variety of marine life forms, ranging from the simplest plankton to the beautiful shells of more complex creatures. Once formed, this limestone can remain buried for billions of years. It becomes accessible to manipulation once seas have shifted, leaving the limestone buried under newly-formed dry land. Once it is exposed, human beings have found such limestone to be a valuable building material. It is often soft and malleable when first quarried, but hardens to a durable surface that is resistant to decay upon exposure to the elements.[4] Limestone can be used as building stones, crushed to provide other building materials (including cement and roofing gravel) or to neutralize acid in soil, and can even be used as a filler in products such as animal feed, paint, and paper.[5] As it is heated, crushed, and consumed, it releases calcium as well as stored carbon molecules back into the environment.

While buried in its undisturbed environment, limestone functions like a depository of both history and various physical elements. It contains not only calcium and carbon, but many other minerals that have been sequestered for a time from the ongoing exchange of atoms among living things. The carbon was originally removed from air and sea by the small creatures whose bodies make up the sediment of limestone. This means

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[3] Shadmon, 33. By way of contrast, *chemical* limestone is formed by the precipitation of calcium carbonate from water or through evaporation when such limestone formations as stalactites and stalagmites are left behind. See http://geology.com/rocks/limestone.shtml.

[4] Shadmon, 37.

[5] Geology.com, "Limestone," http://geology.com/rocks/limestone.shtml, accessed April 7, 2017.

that even stones are embedded in a wider web of interrelated material bodies. Pausing for a moment with the sea creatures that make up limestone, we find that they themselves are part of the complex geophysical process that makes the ocean the largest carbon sink in the world—capturing more of the atmospheric carbon we produce than all the green plants on all the continents combined. Plankton fix carbon during photosynthesis and then either move it up the trophic ladder as transferable energy when the plankton are consumed by larger creatures or carry it to the ocean floor when the plankton die. In the latter case, layers upon layers of such debris sequester that carbon for billions of years as the limestone is formed. In this way, limestone plays a part in regulating the climate and keeping the temperatures of the earth within ranges that allow for the flourishing of life. In addition to sequestering carbon, limestone carries tens of millions of years of earth history within its body. Not only is it literally composed of the atoms that once made up other material bodies, but it preserves the fossils of some of those bodies as well. The only record that remains of many species that evolved and went extinct long before the emergence of humanity is preserved within limestone deposits. Such stones may not have neurons that allow them to categorize and retrieve information, but they nevertheless bear the records of past generations within their bodies.

Human beings have used stones metaphorically to reflect the unchanging, the uncommunicative, the unfeeling, and the unperceiving. But if we examine the existence of biological limestone without privileging anthropocentric perspectives, we find that it comes into being through the slow accumulation of organic remains. Its unique characteristics are produced by a combination of the bodies out of which it is made, the self-organizing properties of the elements of which it is composed, and the forces of its

immediate environment. Over time, a host of these forces can wear it into new shapes as friction and force shave off pieces which are transported to new locales and incorporated into new settings. Although stones do not meet our current definitions of life, if we could observe them over a billion years, we could watch them grow, remain relatively stable for an extended period of time, and then disintegrate with the passage of years. Even stones are engaged in ongoing exchanges with the material bodies that surround them—air, water, other stones, and living bodies such as plants or people. Like living bodies, parts of limestone are taken up into new bodies when they "decompose." Furthermore, while biological limestone might not engage in reflective interpretation of what it has witnessed, it does stand as the only record of times, conditions, and even lifeforms that have long ago passed away. If we are not too constrained by anthropocentric prioritizations that can only call knowledge that which is possessed in the manner of human beings, we might even say that these stones possess a kind of ancient knowledge that is inaccessible to more ephemeral creatures.

From the perspective of biological limestone, created *ousia* might be said to include both elements of stability and principles of change. Athanasius' insight that everything that is created from nothing is susceptible to corruption is supported by our contemplation of biological limestone—even rocks eventually lose their forms and are changed into something else. But "corruption" may not be the most useful term for this process. That word has a negative connotation, based on the idea that a body's current form and function are proper while any other form or function is a devolution from its highest and best role. But as we have seen, limestone is born of the "corruption" of marine life and other material bodies, and its own corruption funds the growth of artifacts

like buildings and roads, as well as that of living bodies like plants and animals. "Transformation" is a better term to describe this process: all bodies that are created from nothing are involved in transformation. In addition to engaging in ongoing processes of transformation, limestone is also interdependent with other parts of creation. Marine life funds its origin, other bodies take up its elements as it disintegrates, and the whole web of life flourishes in an atmosphere that limestone helps to regulate. Far from impassible and unchanging, limestone is characterized by the mutuality and mutability that it shares with all other material bodies—animate and inanimate alike.

Vegetative material bodies

Moving from inanimate objects, to "lower" living creatures, we turn now to plants. Like "rocks," "plants" is a very broad category that consists of countless different species with widely varied forms, functions, and existences. In order to ecomimetically engage a specific material body within this category, we will look at a flowering field grass known as Big Bluestem, or *Andropogon gerardii*. This particular grass is a North American native that, like other plants, derives energy through photosynthetic processes in which water and carbon dioxide are converted into carbohydrates using solar energy and specialized cellular structures. Big Bluestem is a warm-weather perennial that can grow up to ten feet tall, with a main root that descends six to ten feet below the surface.[6] It also produces horizontally-growing rhizomes that helped create the erosion-proof sods of the Midwestern prairies.

Big Bluestem reproduces both vegetatively and sexually, i.e. it can produce genetically identical clones via rhizome growth, but it also produces flowers which can

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[6] U.S. Forest Service, "Andropogon gerardii" in *Index of Species Information* at https://www.fs.fed.us/database/feis/plants/graminoid/andger/all.html. Accessed March 7, 2017.

cross-pollinate and produce genetically diverse seeds.[7] Sexual reproduction is more

prolific after a particularly rainy season, which increases flower and seed production

while reducing the likelihood of prairie fires that could destroy new seedlings. However,

researchers have found that Big Bluestem exhibits a low rate of seed-based reproduction,

possibly due to seed predation, the rotting of seeds during damp periods, and the

generally limited space for germination of new plants in crowded prairie ecosystems.[8]

Therefore, asexual vegetative regeneration is Big Bluestem's primary mode of

propagation. In this process, clones produced from parent rhizomes grow laterally from

the parent root system and emerge during the spring as new shoots. These clones can

grow and reproduce for many years.[9] In other words, a stand of Big Bluestem that

appears to be composed of many different plants may be better perceived as one plant:

each stem is genetically identical and connected to a common root system underground.

Vegetative regeneration allows Big Bluestem to withstand the regular fires that are part

of prairie ecosystems: the underground growth survives even when the above-ground

portions of the plant are destroyed, and can therefore regenerate above-ground growth

rapidly after disturbances.

Such clonal regeneration is not unique to Big Bluestem, but it is a property that

challenges the adequacy of our current understandings of individual material bodies and

their lifespans. Does each visible unit of such a plant count as an individual creature, or

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[7] U.S. Forest Service, "Andropogon gerardii" in *Index of Species Information* at
https://www.fs.fed.us/database/feis/plants/graminoid/andger/all.html. Accessed March 7, 2017.
[8] Abrams, Marc D. 1988. Effects of burning regime on buried seed banks and canopy coverage in a Kansas
tallgrass prairie. The Southwestern Naturalist. 33(1): 65-70. See also U.S. Forest Service, "Andropogon
gerardii" in *Index of Species Information* at
https://www.fs.fed.us/database/feis/plants/graminoid/andger/all.html. Accessed March 7, 2017.
[9] Reichman, O. J. 1987. "Grasslands," in *Konza Prairie: A tallgrass natural history*. Lawrence, KS:
University Press of Kansas: 58-114.

are all connected plants one body? Does the "lifespan" of such a plant span just the time

that one particular patch is growing, or does it cover the entire duration that some

contiguous portion of the plant remains alive—a significantly longer stretch of time?

Consider, for example, one of the largest and oldest living organisms on earth: a grove of

quaking aspens, or *Populus tremuloides*, growing in Fishlake National Forest in Utah.[10]

Named "Pando," this grove is composed of approximately 47,000 tree trunks. It covers

107 acres, weighs approximately 6,615 tons, and is estimated to be over 80,000 years

old.[11] From a human perspective on the surface of the earth, it appears to be a forest of

thousands of individual trees. A subterranean perspective, however, reveals that each tree

trunk is a visible part of a larger organism, united to one massive root system. No

individual trunk within the forest is 80,000 years old, but the organism itself seems to be.

Like Big Bluestem, Pando produces flowers and viable seeds, but its main method of

propagation is through vegetative cloning. Long-lived organisms like these make the

much shorter lifespans of animals seem insignificant by comparison.

Because of its structure and life-cycle, Big Bluestem plays several important roles

in its ecosystem. The combination of a deep taproot, shallow rhizomes, and extensive

above-ground growth allows this grass to secure soil from erosion by both water and

wind.[12] It can access water and other nutrients from much deeper in the soil than can

some of its more shallow-rooted neighbors. These other plants benefit both from reduced

competition for resources at shallow soil depths and from those resources which Big

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[10] Atlas Obscura, "Pando, the Trembling Giant," at http://www.atlasobscura.com/places/pando-the-trembling-giant, accessed March 9, 2017.

[11] "Pando, the Trembling Giant."

[12] For a list of these benefits, see "Big Bluestem," USDA/NRCS Plant Guide, https://plants.usda.gov/plantguide/pdf/pg_ange.pdf. Accessed March 9, 2017.

Bluestem transports to the surface. The above-ground growth provides food to white-tailed deer, bison, and livestock, while the seeds feed a variety of birds. Big Bluestem "suffers" injuries from any number of animals that feed on it, and yet it survives these injuries and continues to produce resources for both itself and other species. Despite the fact that it regenerates most successfully through the budding of underground rhizomes, it continues to produce flowers and seeds that feed the various animals that make up parts of it ecosystem. The tall, above-ground stems provide the physical material for sheltering birds and other small animals throughout the year. Big Bluestem's underground structures make it virtually impervious to fire, and allow it to quickly regenerate after such disturbances—thus enabling it to continue providing erosion control, food, and shelter to other species. Like the limestone examined before, Big Bluestem is engaged in ongoing processes of change, including both gains and losses. These changes benefit both the grass itself and countless other species of material bodies.

Although Aristotle believed that the powers of mobility and sensation differentiated animals from plants, it is clear that plants both sense the environments that surround them and move in response to what they perceive. Evidence indicates that plants sense any number of stimuli, including predation by herbivorous creatures, attacks of soil fungi or microbes, the nutritional quality of soil, and the sufficiency of water supplies. They use these perceptions to govern several "behaviors," including developing new root growth, producing flowers and new shoots, and emitting volatile organic compounds to attract or ward off other creatures.[13] The idea that plants lack the power of sensation seems to be based on the failure of human beings to identify what plant structures

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[13] Matthew Hall, *Plants as Persons: A Philosophical Botany* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2011) 137-156. See also Anthony Trewavas, "Aspects of Plant Intelligence," *Annals of Botany* 92:1-20, 2003.

function analogously to animal sensory organs. Observation of plant behavior gives substantial evidence of plant perception. Root growth displays a plant's behavioral response to such perception, as the plant "decides" which soil patches to exploit by perceiving nutritional density as well as competition from other plants.[14] This leads us from plant perception to plant mobility. In addition to the faster and more impressive above ground movements of plants, ranging from the turning of a plant to follow the sun over the course of the day to the dramatic closing of a Venus fly-trap, plants also move slowly and deliberately underground through their root growth. The long lifespan of clonal colonies like Big Bluestem and Quaking Aspens allows this subterranean movement to be displayed above ground as well. Their rhizomal clones extend in one direction or another, in response to the surrounding conditions. As parental structures die off, the body of the organism literally moves from one place to another. It may take tens or hundreds or thousands of years for such movement to become apparent to human observation, but it is occurring. This indicates that the issue is not that Big Bluestem is immobile while human beings are mobile, but that humans move much further and more quickly than does prairie grass. Despite Aristotle's assumptions, plants do possess the powers of both sensation and motion.

Plants possess other previously unimagined capacities as well. Botanist Anthony Trewavas has suggested that applying the term "intelligence" to plant behavior can, "lead to a better understanding of the complexity of plant signal transduction and the discrimination and sensitivity with which plants construct images of their environment," while also raising, "critical questions concerning how plants compute responses at the

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[14] Hall, 144-145.

whole-plant level."[15] From the deployment of chemical responses to predation to the decision to avoid root contact with a neighboring organism, plants display many behaviors that would be called decision-making if they were done by human beings. In addition to the possibility of something analogous to human thought being carried out by individual plants, experiments also indicate that plants communicate with one another to warn neighboring plants of hostile conditions (like predation). They do so by producing secondary metabolites and using soil fungal networks to facilitate their dissemination to nearby plants.[16] More recently, researchers have found that plants use these fungal networks for more than communication—they actually share resources as mature plants "feed" younger seedlings.[17] While debate continues over the precise capacities of plant life, it appears that the bright lines that were once thought to separate them from the animal kingdom might not be so bright after all.

What does this reveal about created *ousia*? Like the existence of biological limestone previously examined, the life of Big Bluestem and other plants reflects both elements of stability and processes of change. They also undergo transformation, involving growth, damage, regrowth, and eventual demise over long periods of time. When parts are shed or whole organisms pass away, their elements are broken down by animals and microbes and recycled into the larger realm partaking of created *ousia*. As

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[15] Trewavas, 1.

[16] Candice Gaukel Andrews, "The Trees are Talking," in *Good Nature Travel*, September 20, 2011, http://goodnature.nathab.com/the-trees-are-talking/, accessed April 1, 2017. See also David F. Rhoades, "Responses of Alder and Willow to Attack by Tent Caterpillars and Webworms: Evidence for Pheromonal Sensitivity of Willows," in *Plant Resistance to Insects*, ed. by Paul A. Hedin (Washington, D.C.: American Chemical Society, 1983).

[17] Jane Englesiepen, "Trees Communicate: 'Mother Trees' Use Fungal Communication Systems to Preserve Forests," *Ecology*, October 8, 2012, http://www.ecology.com/2012/10/08/trees-communicate/, accessed April 13, 2017. See also Teste F, Simard S, Durall D, Guy R, Jones M, Schoonmaker A., "Access to mycorrhizal networks and roots of trees: importance for seedling survival and resource transfer," *Ecology* [serial online]. October 2009;90(10):2808-2822.

we have seen, they possess the ability to perceive their surrounding environment and respond accordingly. Like the embodied "knowledge" of bygone millennia contained in biological limestone, clonal colonies like Big Bluestem retain evidence of conditions from long ago. Their interaction with such embodied information, however, demonstrates a greater degree of freedom than seems to be exercised by biological limestone. Furthermore, the apparent altruism of resource-sharing plants indicates that material bodies are not only related to one another in neutral or self-serving ways. They can materially benefit some creatures, even if they seek to hinder others. The interdependence that characterizes created *ousia* enables this reciprocity among material bodies.

Animal material bodies

From plants, we will now turn to the category of animal material bodies. Traditionally, human beings have distinguished our species from other animals on the basis of our intelligence, so we will begin by examining so-called irrational animal life, in the form of insects, before turning to "intelligent" animal life.

"Irrational" Insect Life

Insects make up the largest class of organisms found within the animal kingdom, with 900,000 different species identified, and estimates that at least that number have yet to be discovered.[18] The order Hymenoptera, which includes ants, wasps, and bees, is one of the four largest orders of insects (there are more than 17,000 identified species within this order).[19] Within that order, *Atta cephalotes* are leaf-cutter ants that colonize tropical rainforests in Central and South America. As their name suggests, these ants forage for

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[18] Smithsonian, "Numbers of Insects (Species and Individuals)," https://www.si.edu/encyclopedia_si/nmnh/buginfo/bugnos.htm, accessed April 14, 2017.

[19] "Numbers of Insects (Species and Individuals)"

greenery, which they harvest and carry back to their nests. This behavior makes them a significant agricultural pest, which has led to them being studied extensively.

Like many other members of Hymenoptera, *A. cephalotes* are eusocial insects that live in large communities governed by a strict caste system. While an individual worker ant may live for only a few weeks (or as long as a few years), the queen and colony can survive for over a decade.[20] A mature colony is composed of millions of individual ants ranging in size from the quarter-inch length of foraging ants to the two millimeters-long colony dwarfs, and each performs different functions in accordance with their sizes.[21] The foragers travel from the nest to cut large pieces of leaves and petals from plants and bring them back to the colony. There, smaller workers cut the leaf fragments into pieces which even smaller workers, "crush and mold…into moist pellets, and carefully insert them into a mass of similar material."[22] These ants do not consume the leaves, but rather use them to build a matrix on which they grow a fungus that they do eat.[23] Within this garden, the smallest worker ants tend to the fungus. They clean it, remove invading alien fungi, and harvest strands to feed to the rest of the colony.[24]

Individual ant larva hatch from eggs laid by the queen. The larvae are fed and cared for by nursery ants until they pupate and begin their adult duties. While one could theoretically observe the life of one such individual ant, myrmecologist E. O. Wilson suggests that the life-cycle of *A. cephalotes* can be better understood at the level of the

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[20] Oakland Zoo Conservation & Education, "Leaf Cutter Ants," http://www.oaklandzoo.org/Leaf_Cutter_Ants.php, accessed April 14, 2017.

[21] E. O. Wilson, *Biophilia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984) 28-37.

[22] Wilson, 32.

[23] Wilson, 32.

[24] Reis, Bárbara Monique dos Santos, Aline Silva, Martín Roberto Alvarez, Tássio Brito de Oliveira, and Andre Rodrigues. 2015. "Fungal communities in gardens of the leafcutter ant Atta cephalotes in forest and cabruca agrosystems of southern Bahia State (Brazil)." *Fungal Biology* 119, no. 12: 1170-1178. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCO*host* (accessed April 14, 2017).

colony (and queen) than of one of the millions of individual worker ants. A mature leaf-cutter queen has one primary task: laying eggs. She carries sperm collected before she established the colony, during her single "nuptial flight," in a specialized spermatheca for rest of her life. When she lays her eggs, the queen determines whether to "fertilize" an egg (which results in female offspring) or not (which results in males) by opening or shutting the passage connecting this spermatheca to her oviduct.[25] The larva that hatch from these eggs are fed and cared for by adult worker nurses. Although larval queens are genetically identical to their worker sisters, they grow much larger than the other larvae and pupate into new queens with wings. Wilson hypothesizes that the worker nurses might govern the generation of new queens, "through some unknown treatment, perhaps a special diet."[26] When a new queen emerges, fully grown, from her pupal stage, she flies from the colony at the beginning of the rainy season and mates with a number of males. Once she has been inseminated, the males die and the queen returns to the ground where she removes her wings and begins excavating a new colony. Once she has dug a small tunnel, she spits out a pellet of fungal strands she carried in her mouth from her birth colony, fertilizes it, and begins laying eggs on the new fungal mat. She is the only ant available to care for her first brood, feeding them strands of fungus and unhatched eggs while they grow. Within weeks she has raised a generation of worker ants, and the queen retires to her role of egg-laying for her remaining years.[27] The success rate of young

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[25] Wilson, 35.
[26] Wilson, 34.
[27] Wilson, 34-35.

queens establishing new colonies is extremely low, with an estimated 90% dying before a colony has been founded.[28]

Leaf-cutter ants play a significant role in their ecosystems. A colony can strip vegetation at a prodigious rate, resulting in the death of many of the surrounding plants and the thinning of the forest canopy around the nest.[29] This leads to a reduction in leaf litter and the alteration of the chemical make-up of the soil in the surrounding area. It also results in increasing sunlight and temperature, and decreasing moisture in the area.[30] When a nest is abandoned, the area is quickly re-colonized by new vegetation, but the changes caused by the ants alter the make-up of the forest. Although *A. cephalotes* are highly cooperative within their own colonies, they engage in conflicts with those from outside their home group. When harvesting, sometimes at great distances from the nest, foragers use their antennae to scan ants they encounter on their trips to and from the plants. Each ant carries a "home scent," that allows their colony-mates to recognize each other in these encounters. However, they will immediately attack any foreign ants that do not carry that scent.[31] The largest of the colony ants function as soldiers, armed with sharp mandibles that can "chop enemy insects into pieces and easily slice through human skin."[32] These giants defend the nest from large invaders, while smaller workers play a different role in colony defense. The smaller ants have been seen hitchhiking on large leaf fragments the foragers are carrying back to the nest. Studies suggest that they may

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[28] Oakland Zoo Conservation & Education, "Leaf Cutter Ants." http://www.oaklandzoo.org/animal/leaf-cutter-ant, accessed November 9, 2017.

[29] Meyer, Sebastian T., et al. "Ecosystem engineering by leaf-cutting ants: nests of Atta cephalotes drastically alter forest structure and microclimate." *Ecological Entomology* 36, no. 1 (February 2011): 14-24. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCO*host* (accessed April 14, 2017).

[30] Meyer, et al., 14.

[31] Wilson, 31.

[32] Wilson, 33.

provide the foragers with defense from parasitic flies, or that they may be cleaning the leaves prior to their entry into the nest to defend against fungal pathogens.[33] In either case, not only the giant soldiers, but even the smallest ants protect the well-being of the entire colony.

Leaf-cutter ants challenge many of our presuppositions about "irrational" animal life. Because of their symbiotic relationship with the fungus they consume, leaf-cutter ants are considered farming organisms—a behavior rarely seen outside of human beings. Genetic sequencing indicates that their symbiotic relationship with the fungus has altered the genetic make-up of the ants—*A. cephalotes* show decreased numbers and different types of genes involved in nutrient acquisition when compared to other ants.[34] Viewing this relationship from an animal-centric perspective, it can be said that *A. cephalotes* have developed the ability to "digest leaves," by domesticating and transporting the fungus to their new colonies. But Wilson notes that from a fungal-centric perspective, we could also marvel at the fungus that has developed the ability to forage for leaves and migrate from one subterranean location to another by domesticating ants.[35] From either perspective, the deep interdependence of these two material bodies is obvious. In addition to their mutualistic relationship with the fungus, *A. cephalotes* also challenge our presuppositions about what makes an individual organism an individual. Like the relationship between individual shoots of a Big Bluestem clonal colony, the ants of an *A.*

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[33] Yackulic, Charles B., and Owen T. Lewis. "Temporal variation in foraging activity and efficiency and the role of hitchhiking behaviour in the leaf-cutting ant, Atta cephalotes." *Entomologia Experimentalis Et Applicata* 125, no. 2 (November 2007): 125-134. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCO*host* (accessed April 14, 2017).

[34] Suen, Garret, et al. "The Genome Sequence of the Leaf-Cutter Ant Atta cephalotes Reveals Insights into Its Obligate Symbiotic Lifestyle." *Plos Genetics* 7, no. 2 (February 2011): 1-11. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCO*host* (accessed April 14, 2017).

[35] Wilson, 36-37.

cephalotes colony might be perceived as either millions of individual organisms, or parts of one larger organism. Individual ants treat their colony mates as a kind of extended self while differentiating them from the distinctively "other" ants of other colonies. As Wilson suggests, the functioning colony can be fruitfully understood as a superorganism, in which the brain is the whole society at work, and the superorganism's evolutionary success is determined by whether it spawns new queens who successfully establish new colonies.[36]

What does our investigation of the existence of *A. cephalotes* contribute to our understanding of created *ousia*? Like the plants already examined, these ants both perceive the world around them and communicate with one another. They are deeply interdependent with other species: the colony grows through a complex metabolic pathway that includes leaf and fungus as well as ant biology. Their genomes carry the stamp of their necessary relationship to the fungus in another kind of embodied knowledge. Like both the inanimate limestone and the living Big Bluestem we have already examined, *A. cephalotes* experience both the transience of their short individual lifespans and a degree of stability in the longer life-cycle of their colonies. Like other material bodies, the way that they live shapes their surrounding environment. They participate in the ongoing cycles of transformation, growth, and death that seem to characterize all of created reality.

"Smart" Birds

The final distinction in Aristotle's categories was between those bodies that possess animal souls and those that possess rational souls. He assumed that while all

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[36] Wilson, 36.

animals possessed the abilities to perceive and move about, human beings were the only material bodies that possessed intelligence, including the powers of thought and reflection. Throughout history, human beings have claimed that we have certain intellectual capacities that are not shared with any other species, evidenced by such things as our use of tools and our capacity for language. In recent decades, studies of animal cognition have challenged the uniqueness of many of these capacities, suggesting that while we are better than other animals at any number of cognitive tasks, there may not be a qualitative divide between our abilities and those of other animals. Further, it seems that there are many cognitive tasks that different animals perform better than do human beings.[37] We find these capacities not only in primates like ourselves, but also in elephants, birds, and even the invertebrate octopus. In order to resist anthropomorphic projection in our exploration of created *ousia*, we will avoid the order of primates and turn instead to a much more distant relative from the class of birds. This examination will take us to the corvid family, which includes ravens, crows, and jays. More specifically, we will look at the western scrub-jay, or *Aphelocoma californica*.

Western scrub-jays are non-migratory birds measuring 27 to 31 cm in length with a wingspan of 39 cm, and a weight of approximately 80g.[38] They are found from southern Canada to Central Mexico, and their diet varies by season. In the spring and summer they live on fruits and small animals ranging from insects to young birds of other species, while in the winter they switch to berries, nuts, grains, and seeds.[39] Although young

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[37] For example, the remarkable ability of corvids (and squirrels) to recover cached foods after long periods of time, which will be discussed further below.

[38] Beautyofbirds.com, "Western Scrub-Jays (*Aphelocoma californica*) aka Long-Tailed Jays" https://www.beautyofbirds.com/westernscrubjays.html accessed March 10, 2017.

[39] Beautyofbirds.com, "Western Scrub-Jays (*Aphelocoma californica*) aka Long-Tailed Jays."

scrub-jays learn to fly and leave the nest at about 18 days of age, they remain with their parents until they are five months old. Young jays reach sexual maturity within a year, but males need to establish (and be able to defend) a territory before they mate—a job that can take several years.[40] Once the male has established his territory, he builds a nest in the spring and begins trying to attract a mate. If he is successful, the pair will remain together for the rest of their lives.[41] After mating, the female scrub-jay lays one to six eggs. The eggs hatch in approximately 18 days, and the female stays with the chicks while the male forages for food.[42] Western scrub-jays are vulnerable to predation from many different animals, including snakes, raccoons, skunks, and other corvids, but if they escape such predation they can live up to 15 years.[43] They are known to engage in mourning behavior when they encounter the body of a dead scrub-jay, vocalizing by the body for a half hour and remaining near it for days.[44]

Like other corvids, Western scrub-jays collect and cache seeds during the summer and fall for future use. While they retrieve most of their stores, the seeds that they do not recover sprout—making these birds an important seed-dispersal vector in the life cycles of many plants.[45] Western scrub-jays also form a mutualistic relationship with Columbian black-tailed deer, eating small parasites off of their skin.[46] In addition to these beneficial functions within their ecosystem, scrub-jays can become agricultural pests, particularly

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[40] ADW, "*Aphelocoma californica*."
[41] Animal Diversity Web, "*Aphelocoma californica*: western scrub jay," http://animaldiversity.org/accounts/Aphelocoma_californica/, accessed April 14, 2017.
[42] ADW, "*Aphelocoma californica*."
[43] ADW, "*Aphelocoma californica*."
[44] National Wildlife Federation, "Western scrub-jay," https://www.nwf.org/Wildlife/Wildlife-Library/Birds/Western-Scrub-Jay.aspx, accessed April 14, 2017.
[45] ADW, "*Aphelocoma californica*."
[46] ADW, "*Aphelocoma californica*."

due to their preference for certain fruit trees.[47] They are both predator and prey, killing and eating animals ranging from moth larvae to small birds and lizards, while also serving as prey to larger carnivores.

Corvids' impressive cognitive abilities have made them the subject of a great deal of study. Many corvids store food for the winter in hundreds of hiding places, are able recall the locations of their caches months later, and retrieve the food at need. Study of Western scrub-jay caching has led researchers to hypothesize that these little birds possess several cognitive capacities that were once believed to belong to human beings alone. One example of this has to do with episodic memory, or the ability to recall not only that something occurred (the seeds were hidden) or where it occurred (in that cache), but when, or how long ago it happened. The caching behavior of Western scrub-jays indicates that they may possess episodic memory similar to that of human beings. When scrub-jays in the lab were taught that their preferred food (wax-moth larvae, or wax worms) spoiled after a few days, they abandoned the wax worm caches if they were prevented from returning for 48 hours.[48] They could remember how long it had been since they had hidden the food, and abandoned perishable food that had passed its "expiration date."

In addition to having a temporal element to their memories, researchers have also argued that Western scrub-jays are capable of mental attribution, or the ability to understand what other birds can perceive and what they may do with that information. Western scrub-jays are notorious thieves. They will watch other birds hiding food, and

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[47] ADW, "*Aphelocoma californica*."

[48] Clayton, Nicola S., and Anthony Dickinson. "Episodic-like memory during cache recovery by scrub jays." *Nature* 395, no. 6699 (September 17, 1998): 272. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCO*host* (accessed April 19, 2017).

then raid those caches once they are unwatched. Studies have revealed that scrub-jay

caching behavior changes in the presence of other scrub-jays—they attempt to hide their

food out of sight of other birds, and if that is not possible, they engage in a process of re-

caching, moving the food several times.[49] Perhaps more interestingly, birds that have

never raided another bird's cache themselves ("naïve jays") do not exhibit the same re-

caching behavior, indicating that the suspicious jays are projecting their own past

thievery onto the watching birds.[50] Further research indicates that scrub-jays are even

able to reflect on their own knowledge, something called metacognition. When allowed

to watch two food-hiding events simultaneously, one of which would require closer

attention for them to be able to re-locate the cache if they were given the chance to raid it,

they allocate their mental and observational capacities accordingly.[51] Western scrub-jays

display an array of cognitive abilities that were once considered unique to human beings.

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[49] Dally, Joanna M., Nathan J. Emery, and Nicola S. Clayton. "Avian Theory of Mind and counter espionage by food-caching western scrub-jays (Aphelocoma californica)." *European Journal Of Developmental Psychology* 7, no. 1 (January 2010): 17-37. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCO*host* (accessed April 19, 2017).

[50] Those who would challenge these findings attribute the scrub-jays re-caching behavior to stress, using a computer simulation, see Vaart, Elske van der, Rineke Verbrugge, and Charlotte K. Hemelrijk, "Corvid Re-Caching without 'Theory of Mind': A Model," *Plos ONE* 7, no. 3 (March 2012): 1-8. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCO*host* (accessed April 19, 2017). However, stress does not explain the difference between "naïve" and "suspicious" jays, and researchers have run additional experiments that undermine the stress explanation, see Thom, James M., and Nicola S. Clayton, "Re-caching by Western Scrub-Jays (Aphelocoma californica) Cannot Be Attributed to Stress," *Plos ONE* 8, no. 1 (January 2013): 1-4. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCO*host* (accessed April 19, 2017).

[51] In this experiment, the scrub-jays could look into one of two compartments while food was being "hidden" in one of several cups. In the "Forced-choice" compartment, all but one cup had lids and were therefore inaccessible, while in the "Free-choice" compartment, none of the cups had lids. Because there was only one (obvious) choice in the Forced-choice compartment but many in the Free-choice compartment, the latter required more attention in order for the scrub-jay to correct the select cup during recovery. The Western scrub-jays showed a preference for observing the free-choice compartment during hiding, indicating that they were able to evaluate which situation required their attention and adjust their behavior accordingly. See Watanabe, Arii, Uri Grodzinski, and Nicola Clayton. "Western scrub-jays allocate longer observation time to more valuable information." *Animal Cognition* 17, no. 4 (July 2014): 859-867. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCO*host* (accessed April 19, 2017).

What does our examination of Western scrub-jays contribute to our investigation of created *ousia*? Like the other creatures that we have examined, Western scrub-jays are in interdependent relationships with the other material bodies that surround them. They come into being, grow, and mature while consuming other creatures, and they are in turn consumed by other creatures. They contribute to the well-being of others within their ecosystems, from providing deer with pest control to serving as seed-dispersers for a variety of plants. Like *A. cephalotes* and Big Bluestem, scrub-jays are capable of perceiving the world around them, and they use those perceptions to modify their own behavior. They experience both stability and change, they engage in ongoing processes of transformation, and their bodies incorporate the material conditions they have experienced—all things they share with other creatures partaking of created *ousia*. While their cognitive capacities do seem to be greater than those of the other material bodies that we have examined, this difference can help us understand the common nature of created *ousia*.

Speaking theologically, Soren Kierkegaard and Karl Barth emphasized the qualitative divide that separates human beings as part of the created order from the Creator.[52] But anthropocentric biases have often led human beings to assume that there is a qualitative divide that separates human beings from all other members of creation as well. This assumption has been most pronounced when it comes to issues of intelligence. There has been an unreasonable resistance to calling capacities such as those exhibited by the Western scrub-jay "intelligence," a term some argue should be reserved to human

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[52] See Kierkegaard, Søren, *Training in Christianity, and the Edifying discourse which 'accompanied' it*, Transl. by Walter Lowrie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1941) 139; and Karl Barth, "The Preface to the Second Edition," in *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. by Edwyn C. Hoskyns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968) 10.

beings alone (preferring the term "cognition" when dealing with animal mental processes). This resistance can be seen, for example, in the case of scientists who felt the need to rebut proposals that Western scrub-jays possess some form of a Theory of Mind, even though they did not work with the birds themselves. These scientists designed a computer simulation of a Western scrub-jay and used it to argue that stress at the presence of another bird, rather than an ability to imagine what the other bird might be thinking, explains their re-caching behavior.[53] (In turn, the original researchers designed new experiments, carried out with actual living birds that ruled out the proffered stress explanation.)[54] The fact that scrub-jays appear to possess episodic memories and a Theory of Mind analogous to those of human beings, as well as spatial recall that far exceeds that of human beings, calls into question the idea that human intelligence is qualitatively different from that of other animals. This continuity of intelligence makes sense from a scientific perspective. Evolution explains that we all share a common history, although we are each shaped by a combination of universal forces and particular local communities of material bodies. We should share traits with other material bodies, although the precise combinations of those traits vary from species to species. This goes for our cognitive abilities as well as our physical bodies. As ethologist Frans de Waal notes,

> That we can't compete with squirrels and nutcrackers [on retrieving caches]—I even forget where I parked my car—is irrelevant, since our species does not need this kind of memory for survival…There are lots of wonderful cognitive adaptations out there that we don't have or need. *That is why ranking cognition on*

[53]Vaart, Elske van der, Rineke Verbrugge, and Charlotte K. Hemelrijk, "Corvid Re-Caching without 'Theory of Mind': A Model," *Plos ONE* 7, no. 3 (March 2012): 1-8. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCO*host* (accessed April 19, 2017).
[54] Thom, James M., and Nicola S. Clayton, "Re-caching by Western Scrub-Jays (Aphelocoma californica) Cannot Be Attributed to Stress," *Plos ONE* 8, no. 1 (January 2013): 1-4. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCO*host* (accessed April 25, 2017).

> *a single dimension is a pointless exercise. Cognitive evolution is marked by many peaks of specialization.* The ecology of each species is key.[55]

Instead of imagining intelligence to be only one particular set of cognitive abilities, we should rather think of multiple intelligences possessed by a wide variety of beings. Instead of asking whether Western scrub-jays are intelligent, we should pay attention to how their particular forms of intelligence enable them to function within their environments. As we have seen, there is much to learn about the intelligence of an *A. cephalotes* hive and of Big Bluestem, if we can overcome the anthropocentric biases that insist on the impossibility of intelligence among any "lower" lifeforms. When we stop focusing on the differences that allow us to categorize material bodies, we can see their commonalities. Then we can see that these commonalities are the foundation of the differences that characterize creation. The interdependence that we have found to be common across all of the material bodies we have examined is what leads to different expressions of our shared capacities. We develop our capacities in response to the social and ecological systems in which we find ourselves. Our ecology—i.e. the other material bodies that surround and even overlap our own—is key. Once we understand this, we can begin to see that diversity itself is also part of created *ousia*.

Created Ousia

Traditional formulations of conciliar Christology have focused on the Word's assumption of humanity, identified by those characteristics understood to be essential to human nature. These include such attributes as peccability, contingency, perceptibility, mutability, and limitations (in power, time, and space). However, when we focus instead

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[55] Frans de Waal, *Are We Smart Enough to Know How Smart Animals Are?* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2016) 12 (emphasis added).

on the Word's assumption of created *ousia*, we might understand the attributes assumed

in the incarnation differently. To be created means to be caught up in ongoing processes

of transformation, in which one both transforms other material bodies, and is in turn

transformed by them as well. All material bodies are subject to transformation—what

Athanasius called corruption, but what process theologians refer to as "becoming." To be

created does not mean to be fully formed and then placed within the universe. Instead, it

means to be called into being from the elements of universe, and to be subject to the

forces that govern material existence. To be created means to be sustained by elements of

stability that prevent annihilation, but it also means being subject to the transforming

creativity that empowers this process of becoming. It means being dependent on other

material bodies and having other material bodies dependent on you. In other words, it

means being part of an interdependent community that shapes you even as it is shaped by

you.

This ongoing process of transformation does not result in uniformity among

creatures. Rather, it insures the differences that make each species and each individual

member of each species unique. The particular material bodies with which we interact

shape us, allowing our capacities to develop in different ways. Being a particularly

located material body with its own particular genetic and individual history enables a

patch of Big Bluestem to derive the energy it needs to live and grow directly from

sunlight—a capacity that human beings have never possessed. In contrast, the energy

needed to form biological limestone comes from the weight of accumulated sediment—a

pressure that would kill most living material bodies. Leaf-cutter ants and Western scrub-

jays, like other animals, derive their energy from the consumption of other living (or

recently living) creatures. The processes of transformation to which all creation is subject enable millions of ants to function with one purpose, even as they carry out separate tasks, while also equipping Western scrub-jays to negotiate complex relationships with pilfering relatives. These processes enable Big Bluestem to provide both food and shelter to a host of other living creatures without jeopardizing the grass's own survival. It means that plurality, not only of bodies but also of the characteristics and capacities that those bodies possess, is inherent within created *ousia*.

The fact that all material bodies are interrelated with one another indicates that the interests of no single species can be isolated from those of others. We are actually composed of other material bodies. In turn, we also play roles in larger material bodies. Plant clonal colonies like Big Bluestem challenged the idea that organisms that appear to be separate individuals actually are different material bodies. Social insects like the leaf-cutter ant take this challenge even further, suggesting that organisms that exist in separate bodies moving independently of one another might be better understood as parts of a larger organism. As we saw in Chapter 3, what we perceive as individual human beings can be fruitfully understood as communities teeming with millions of different species of living creatures. We can also expand this understanding in order to view communities of human beings as parts of an even larger organism. James Lovelock has argued that "organisms and their environment evolve as a single, self-regulating system," and that the entire planet earth can, from this perspective, be understood as a super-organism that regulates itself through the material bodies of which it is composed.[56] All material bodies,

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[56] Lovelock, James, "Gaia: The living Earth," *Nature* 426, no. 6968 (December 18, 2003): 769-770. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCO*host* (accessed April 30, 2017).

it seems, are composed of smaller material bodies, and in turn function as parts in ever-larger material bodies.[57]

This investigation demonstrates three reasons it is more fruitful to focus on the Word's assumption of created *ousia*, rather than on the assumption of a specifically human nature. First, as we discussed in Chapter 3, it seems that species do not possess eternally fixed natures. In this chapter, we have found that change is one constant across all the material bodies that we examined. The form of a material body may remain stable for a given period of time, but change seems to be inevitable. Because of the transience of both individual material bodies and species, a particular species "nature" considered in isolation from its location in the broader environmental nexus does not seem to be an adequate mechanism for the Word to bring whatever gifts the Word brings to the cosmos.[58] Second, individual species are defined by their unique combinations of characteristics and capacities. Although these characteristics and capacities do overlap across species' boundaries, against Aristotle's view "higher" species do not possess all of the characteristics that "lower" species possess plus some unique traits of their own. It is not true that animals have all of the capacities that plants do, plus some additional traits that place them higher on the Great Chain of Being (e.g. animals certainly lack the ability to photosynthesize). Nor is it true that human beings possess all of the capacities that "lower" animals do, plus some additional ones that place them even higher (on a physiological level, we lack the gift of flight, and on a cognitive level, we certainly do

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[57] Logically, it would appear that there will be limits—that there are some material bodies that are the smallest components of reality which are not made up of any other material bodies, and that there is one comprehensive category, such as all material existence, that is not part of any larger material body. However, the vast majority of material bodies seem to fall somewhere between these two extremes.

[58] Indeed, given the possibility that human "nature" may one day evolve, it is not even adequate to insure that these gifts are conveyed to our distant descendants.

not have the spatial recall of a Western scrub-jay). This is why the human-as-microcosm argument is ultimately an insufficient guarantor that whatever benefits the Word conveys in the incarnation could be passed on to the rest of the cosmos by means of its assumption of a particularly human nature. Human beings do not encapsulate all of the different forms of existence that we have seen material bodies may experience. This indicates that created *ousia*, understood as what is shared by all creatures, can affirm the universal reach of the incarnation in ways that human nature cannot. Third, the interdependence of all material bodies indicates that we do share in *something* that crosses species boundaries. Our bodies are made up of different species, and our communities incorporate plants, animals, and inanimate bodies as well as other human beings. We cannot be removed from this web of interdependence and still function any more than our brains can be removed from our bodies and still function. This web of interdependence with all material bodies better explains how something entering creation at one point could be shared across the full breadth of created *ousia* than does the more nominal category of human nature. The concept of created *ousia* is better able to accommodate these elements of transience, difference, and interdependence than is the category of human nature.

If we were to try to cast this description of created *ousia* in the classical language of debates over the coherence of the incarnation, we would find that individual instantiations of created *ousia* could be characterized by the same predicates traditionally attached to humanity. Individual creatures are mutable, passible, and temporally and spatially limited. If they are living, then they are mortal. Even if they are not living, we have seen that they will eventually disintegrate and be taken up into new creatures.

Whatever theological claims are bound up in the predicates traditionally ascribed to humanity, they are not jeopardized when we focus on the created *ousia* rather than the human nature of the incarnation. Shifting the emphasis in this way allows Christians to affirm the same characteristics of material bodies without privileging any one species. In this way, it undermines anthropocentrism. However, it also makes manifest certain difficulties with the terms used in coherence debates, to which we will turn in the final section of this chapter. Before we dive into the debates themselves, we will first see how our ecomimetic investigation can inform our understanding of the divine.

Divine Attributes

As we saw in Chapter 1, debates over the coherence of the incarnation begin with presuppositions about what is necessarily true of God. One way of understanding these necessary attributes follows the Anselmian claim that God is whatever it is better to be than not to be. This *a priori* understanding of divine "great-making" attributes operates within a human framework for evaluating whether it is better to be something (good, loving, immutable, omnipotent, omniscient, etc.) than to not be that thing.[59] As deployed in the Western theological tradition, this approach invariably privileges human ways of being in the world, generally assuming that human characteristics are better than merely animal ones, which are better than merely vegetal ones, which are still better than those characteristics possessed by inanimate things. For instance, it assumes that the ability of a human being to form desires and plans for the future is better than limestone's ability to become and be without any such designs, and that the divine must therefore be more like a human being in the possession of a rational will. It similarly privileges other human

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[59] There is also an alternative, apophatic way of addressing these characteristics which we will explore more fully below.

capacities—both real and desired (e.g., the ability to accumulate and organize knowledge in a particularly human manner, the ability to abstract oneself from surrounding conditions). However, our ecomimetic examination of different kinds of material bodies indicates that there are many other ways of being than those experienced by human beings, other ways of perceiving the world and processing the information provided by it, and other manners of interacting with different beings than those used by human beings. The *a priori* approach to naming the divine attributes is shaped by anthropocentric assumptions that lead to an anthropomorphic portrait of the divine. If we are going to resist anthropocentric distortions of our understanding of the divine, we will have to seek a different way to contemplate God.

Because this *a priori* approach does not enable us to say anything about the divine that is not distorted by anthropocentric assumptions, any contribution ecomimetic interpretation can make will need to approach this conversation from a different angle. We cannot assume that human beings have some privileged access to knowledge of God's essence. God's transcendence of creation makes it impossible for us, as creatures on this side of the ontological divide, to form any fully adequate concepts of the divine nature.[60] However, this does not foreclose us from saying anything at all about God. Starting with the Christian claim that God is the Creator of all that exists, we can assume that creation reveals *something* about God even if it does not allow us to comprehend the divine *ousia*. Adding other scriptural claims about God's relationship to creation, we learn that God considers creation "good" (Genesis 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31), cares for the well-being of individual parts of creation (Psalm 104; Job 38-41; Matthew 6:25-30,

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[60] This recognition of the difficulties divine transcendence creates for describing God underlies Aquinas's analogical approach to naming, discussed in Chapter 1. See ST I.13.

10:29), and loves the whole of creation (John 3:16). Based on these claims—that God loves, cares for, and considers good all that God creates—our ecomimetic investigation should enable us to discern something about what God values (considers good, cares for, loves), even though it cannot define what God is. From our investigation, we have seen that creation is mutable, transient, diverse, and interdependent—all characteristics that have been devalued by classical descriptions of great-making attributes.

As we have seen, every material body is constantly engaged in processes of transformation as it grows, maintains itself, and eventually diminishes or dies. If God finds this world of shifting landmasses, variable weather, metabolic processes, emerging species, and changing landscapes "good," then it would seem to follow that God values change. Since there is nothing in this world that is immutable, calling immutability a great-making attribute seems like a repudiation of the goodness of creation. Without change, there is no birth, growth, or life. Although human beings who perceive mutability as a threat to security tend to view such changeableness as a defect, this negative valuation does not necessarily reflect the divine view of mutability. If every created material body is, and always has been, mutable, it seems more likely that God views mutability favorably. Indeed, this is a fundamental tenet of process theology, which privileges "becoming" over "being." As John B. Cobb and David Ray Griffin explain, "to be actual is to be a process. Anything that is not a process is an abstraction from process, not a full-fledged actuality."[61] From what we can observe in creation, God does not seem to devalue created beings for undergoing change.

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[61] John B. Cobb, Jr. & David Ray Griffin, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1976), 14. They further note how this brings their approach into conflict with *a priori* approaches: "Since the world as we experience it is a place of process, of change, of

From this valuing of mutable creatures, we can infer that God values transient beings, and scripture affirms this as well (see especially Eccl. 3:1-8). Because everything is eventually transformed, if God cares about individual material bodies at all, then God values transient beings. As the author of Matthew notes, God's providence extends to birds that are sold two for a penny, and to weeds that are thrown into the oven for fuel (Matt. 6:25-30, 10:29). Whether they exist for moments or for millennia, all material bodies pass away. But according to Christian doctrine, God cares for them all. While human beings tend to disparage things that are shorter-lived—consider the "insignificance" of a mayfly—there is nothing to indicate that the duration of a thing's existence reflects the amount that God cares for it. Human beings have viewed mortality and transience as defects rather than as elements of created goodness, but God's valuing of creation does not seem to follow human priorities.[62] From an anthropocentric perspective, God values mortal creatures *in spite of* their mortality. But from an ecomimetic perspective, one might say that God also values the transience of created bodies—their very mortality might be part of what makes them good. In other words, God may not value the mayfly in spite of its short lifespan, rather God values the mayfly just as it is, short lifespan and all.

From what we know of creation, God also seems to value diversity. The processes of transformation in which all material bodies are involved have led to a dizzying array of different kinds of bodies. There is not just one species, or one living creature, or one animal, any more than there is just one planet, or one solar system, or one galaxy.

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becoming, of growth and decay, the contrary notion that what is actual or fully real is beyond change leads to a devaluation of life in the world."

[62] If it did, then it would seem that God cares for the shaking aspen more than for human beings, and for mountains more than either.

Creation is marked by plurality. If God considers this planet, with its land and water, mountains and valleys, sea creatures and land animals, to be good, then God values and cares for the flourishing of a multiplicity of material bodies.[63]

Finally, God values creaturely interdependence. All of creation is interdependently related, coming into being from other material bodies and passing away into other material bodies. Nothing exists in solitary independence. Water shapes stones that in turn change the composition of the water. Plants transform molecules in the soil and atmosphere into carbohydrates, which fuel the rest of life on this planet. Bacteria transform multicellular organisms back into molecules in the soil, water, and atmosphere once they have died. Mountains rise up with the shifting of tectonic plates, and are worn back down by the forces of wind and rain. What we perceive as individual creatures are often complex ecosystems teeming with different material bodies, all exchanging their products with one another. Interdependence lies at the heart of this created order, indicating that God values this kind of interrelatedness. It would seem that God does not find passibility, mutability, mortality, or other forms of transience to be defects that deter from the value of creation, particularly considering the fact that these characteristics are shared by all of God's beloved material creatures.

While this does not rule out the possibility that the divine *ousia* is impassible, simple, immutable, and immortal, it provides no support for *a priori* assumptions that a being should (let alone must) be any of these things in order to be divine. If we follow

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[63] Even more anthropocentric approaches to theology find this diversity to be a positive aspect of created reality. See Aquinas's argument that "He brought things into being in order that His goodness might be communicated to creatures, and be represented by them; and because His goodness could not be adequately represented by one creature alone, He produced many and diverse creatures, that what was wanting to one in the representation of the divine goodness might be supplied by another," ST I.47.1.

Aquinas's logic of analogical predication, we *could* argue that the created goodness of

mutability, diversity, transience, and mutuality finds its source in divine interdependence

and multiplicity. However, I am not making any such claim here. Our ecomimetic

investigation cannot render an adequate literal description of the divine *ousia* because the

idea of divine transcendence forecloses all such literal descriptions. As Kathryn Tanner

explains, divine transcendence is "a grammatical remark about theological language: it

signals a general linguistic disturbance, *the failure of all predicative attribution*, in

language about God."[64] This transcendence undermines all univocal predication about the

divine.[65] Therefore, I am not claiming that our ecomimetic investigation means that God

is mutable, mortal, or dependent. What I am trying to clarify is that an understanding of

the deity that is clearly shaped by anthropocentric presuppositions should not carry a

presumption of correctness, particularly a presumption that seemingly ignores divine

transcendence in its assertion of what attributes are essential to the divine. Yes, Christians

have long affirmed that God is immutable and impassible. But Christians have also long

affirmed that God loves transient, mortal, suffering creatures. Furthermore, Christians

have also affirmed that in the incarnation, the Son of God suffered and died. To the

debates generated from these apparently contradictory claims, we will now turn.

Coherence Debates

As I noted in Chapter 1, my proposal does not resolve the coherence debates.

Instead, I would argue that it highlights a fundamental flaw in the way those debates have

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[64] Kathryn Tanner, "Creation ex nihilo as Mixed Metaphor," *Modern Theology* 29:2 April 2013, 138 (emphasis added).

[65] Tanner goes on to argue that "when one affirms that God is immaterial one is not denying that God has bodily existence," 139. Neither corporeality nor incorporeality can be literally (i.e. univocally) predicated of the divine.

been carried out. Our ecomimetic investigation provides a new framework for exploring the underlying problem by calling into question anthropocentric presuppositions about what is entailed by saying that something is created or that it is divine. Traditional notions of divinity include some predications that are analogically applied to both creatures and the Creator and other predications that are the denial of creaturely attributes. For example, Anselm asserts that the being who is greater than can be thought is just, truthful, happy, percipient, omnipotent, merciful, impassible, living, wise, good, eternal, and unbounded.[66] Many of these predicates (just, truthful, happy, percipient, merciful, living, wise, and good) can also be applied to creatures, while others (omnipotent, impassible, eternal, and unbounded) are negations of inherent properties of created *ousia*. Although the latter set of predicates appear to be apophatic denials of creaturely limitations, these apparently apophatic attributes have functioned cataphatically in coherence debates, asserting positive claims about the divine nature that are in turn used to attack the coherence of the incarnation.

An ecomimetic approach supports my argument that seemingly apophatic statements are functioning cataphatically because only those creaturely characteristics that have traditionally been considered negatives are being denied. A more deeply apophatic approach manages to avoid anthropocentric distortions by denying the literal applicability of *any* language to the divine. In his discussion of the divine nature, Dionysius the Areopagite begins by denying those characteristics that human beings perceive as limitations or defects within the created condition, but continues denying even those predicates human beings value positively, explaining that the divine:

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[66] Anselm, 83-84, 88.

is not soul, or mind, or endowed with the faculty of imagination, conjecture, reason, or understanding; nor is It any act of reason or understanding; nor can it be described by the reason or perceived by the understanding, since It is not number, or order, or greatness, or littleness, or equality, or inequality, and since It is not immovable nor in motion, nor at rest, and has no power, and is not power or light, and does not live, and is not life; nor is It personal essence, or eternity, or time; nor can It be grasped by the understanding, since It is not knowledge or truth; nor is It kingship or wisdom; nor is It one, nor is It unity, nor is It Godhead or Goodness; nor is It a Spirit, as we understand the term, since It is not Sonship or Fatherhood, nor is It any other thing such as we or any other being can have knowledge of; nor does It belong to the category or non-existence or to that of existence; nor do existent beings know It as it actually is, nor does It know them as they actually are; nor can the reason attain to It to name It or to know It; nor is it darkness, nor is It light, or error, or truth; nor can any affirmation or negation apply to it; for while applying affirmations or negations to those orders of being that come next to It, we apply not unto It either affirmation or negation, inasmuch as It transcends all affirmation by being the perfect and unique Cause of all things, and transcends all negation by the pre-eminence of Its simple and absolute nature—free from every limitation and beyond them all.[67]

Such an apophatic denial of all created categories both preserves divine transcendence and avoids anthropomorphic projections, but it does so by making apparent the inadequacy of all language about the divine. However, Dionysius does not begin with this denial—through the profusion of both affirmations and denials in *On the Divine Names* and *The Mystical Theology*, Dionysisus appeals to what Denys Turner calls the "twin pressures of affirmation and negation, of the cataphatic and the apophatic. We must both affirm and deny all things of God; and then we must negate the contradiction between the affirmed and the denied."[68] In other words, if we are to pay adequate linguistic attention to divine transcendence, we would have to affirm that God is happy, deny by saying that God is not happy, and then negate the contradiction between the two – and do just the same with all of those positive attributes that Anselm simply affirmed. If we were simply

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[67] Dionysius the Areopagite, *On The Divine Names and The Mystical Theology*, tran. C.E. Rolt (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1957) 200-201

[68] Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 22.

to deny creaturely attributes to the divine, then we might succumb to the illusion that our language was capable of conveying positive knowledge of God.[69] The selectivity of denial exhibited by the coherence debates—which pay no attention to assertions that God is loving or spirit or truthful—hints that those involved understand all of the predicates to convey positive content about the divine.

Furthermore, the selectivity of this denial once again reveals the anthropocentric biases involved in these debates. According to Turner, all creaturely predicates are equally applicable and equally inapplicable to the divine: "to name God adequately, we not only may, but must, name God by all the names of creatures: only the 'sum total of creation' adequately reflects the superabundant variety of God."[70] There is only one thing that cannot be used to name God, and that is whatever might be considered evil ("because there is no kind of thing which evil is").[71] If both creaturely predicates and their negations must be denied to preserve God's transcendence, then only that which is "evil" could be denied without also denying its negation. This indicates that the predications used in the coherence debates—both those that are "positive" and are not denied, and those that are "negative" denials of the characteristics of creaturely existence, are illicitly assumed to convey a positive conception of the divine *ousia*. This conception is shaped by anthropocentric assumptions about the "goodness" of certain created characteristics (such as being just, happy, living) and the "evilness" of others (such as mutability, finitude, and interdependence or limitation in power). This illicit transformation of seemingly

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[69] As Turner argues, the power of this illusion is what spurs Dionysius to insist on making impious, inappropriate affirmations about the divine: "the multiplicity of vulgar images...because they lack any plausibility as comprehensive or appropriate names, paradoxically have a more uplifting efficacy," 24-25.

[70] Turner, 24.

[71] Turner, 23.

apophatic denials into cataphatic assertions about the divine *ousia* can be seen in the debates we examined in Chapter 1 over the meanings of immutability and omnipotence. Those who argue that the incarnation is incoherent because the divine by definition is unable to change in any way have treated the divine attribute of immutability as a cataphatic claim subject to univocal definition. Their opponents are not exempt from this critique. Whether one claims that divine immutability means that God is incapable of changing in any way, or that it means that God remains faithful, or that God does not become something other than what God is, positive content is being attached to what began as an acknowledgement of divine transcendence.

Our ecomimetic investigation puts even more pressure on the language used by these debates by calling into question presuppositions about creaturely characteristics as well. We can see this by a brief examination of four of the incompatible predicates Pawl draws from the conciliar documents: localized in a place, visible, comprehensible, and expressible in writing.[72] Let us take a moment to consider how these predicates fare when applied to created *ousia*.

Although individual instantiations of created *ousia* can be characterized by the same predicates that the debates traditionally ascribe to human beings, if created *ousia* is an actual state of being shared by all of material reality, then it calls several of those predicates into question. While individual instantiations are localized to a place, created *ousia* itself encompasses all of creation—it is everywhere.[73] If omnipresence is given the

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[72] Pawl, 91.

[73] This can be understood analogously to Wilson's description of the *A. cephalotes* colony as a superorganism: each ant is located in one specific place, but the colony is present wherever any member is. Similarly, created *ousia* is present wherever there is an existent created being. This would include any immaterial realities that could be considered a part of creation.

positive definition of being present in every part of creation, then it would seem to apply to created *ousia*. Similarly, created *ousia* does not die, but continues to exist even as individual instantiations of created *ousia* pass away.[74] If immortal means incapable of death, then created *ousia* is immortal—but so are all parts of creation that are not alive in the first place. It would seem that "incapable of death" may not capture all that theologians want to claim about the life of God when they attach the predicate "immortal" to their understandings of divinity. This could mean that these divine predicates instead stand as signifiers of an apophatic denial of creaturely categories to the divine, or it could mean that the characteristics of created *ousia* are analogically related to these attributes.

Three of Pawl's predicates (visible, comprehensible, and expressible in writing) have more to do with the capacities of the observer than with the thing to which the predicates are attached. By way of illustration, the visibility of a being has as much to do with the capacities of the observer as with the being itself—obviously everything is invisible to a blind person. But under some conditions, certain human beings can see things that others cannot. For example, someone with synesthesia may be able to see sound as colors or shapes.[75] Furthermore, we have reason to believe that other creatures can see things invisible to the human eye: a number of animals can perceive infrared or ultraviolet light (both invisible to human beings).[76] Without even implicating the

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[74] Of course, it would also be true that human nature outlasts its individual instantiations. But human beings have not always existed, they do not exist everywhere, and there is no guarantee that they will continue exist as long as the rest of creation does. So human nature could not be considered "immortal" in the same way that created *ousia* can be.

[75] Goode, Erica, "When People See a Sound and Hear a Color," *New York Times*, February 23, 1999., F3, *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCO*host* (accessed April 30, 2017).

[76] Williams, Caroline, "SENSE AND SENSE ABILITY. (Cover story)," *New Scientist* 211, no. 2826 (August 20, 2011): 32-37. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCO*host* (accessed April 30, 2017).

capacities of the observer, the vantage point from which an object is observed affects its visibility, as David Abram demonstrates in his description of an encounter with a simple bowl:

> The clay bowl resting on the table in front of me meets my eye with its curved and grainy surface. Yet I can only see one side of that surface—the other side of the bowl is *invisible*, hidden by the side that faces me. In order to view that other side, I must pick up the bowl and turn it around in my hands, or else walk around the wooden table. Yet, having done so, I can no longer see the first side of the bowl. Surely I know that it still exists…*Yet I myself am simply unable to see the whole of this bowl at once.*[77]

Not only does one side of a material body always remain "invisible" to the observer, the inside of a body is not visible without breaking or dissecting that body. Of course, the vantage point of the observer does not affect the physical make-up of the observed body—if it is perceptible it remains perceptible whether anyone is looking at it or not. But so long as we are talking about whether something is perceptible, we are saying at least as much about the qualities of the perceivers as we are of the object itself.

Similarly, the trait of comprehensibility has as much to do with the one doing the comprehending as it does with the body being comprehended. Things that were once considered incomprehensible now have very plausible explanations, while things that we once thought we comprehended, we now know are complex beyond our wildest dreams. Human beings are to some extent comprehensible, but there are certainly ways in which they exceed our capacity for comprehension. This goes for other material bodies as well. Furthermore, there are different levels of comprehension among human beings. If comprehensibility means that something can be fully understood by a human being, or that it is understood by everyone, then it cannot apply to material bodies. If it means

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[77] David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996) 51. (Emphasis added.)

capable of being understood in some way, by someone, then it would seem to apply to God no less than creatures (after all, God can be said to understand God's self).[78] The predicate, "expressible in writing," seems to be another way of saying that something is comprehensible, but it further reveals the problems with these predicates. Surely, we can describe material bodies in writing in some way. But would anyone concede that any history, biography, or psychoanalysis report fully captures the entirety of a human being? We can describe various facets of created reality with some degree of reliability using whatever language we agree upon. But at the same time, language and writing fall short. There are ways in which no material being is fully expressible in writing, just as no material body is fully comprehensible.

The way that debates over the coherence of the incarnation use language about both the divine and the human is inadequate for the topics that are being discussed. Divine transcendence means the univocal definition of predicates across the divine/created divide is inappropriate, and the tradition has generally recognized that this is so. Similarly, a greater sensitivity to the complexity of material existence reveals that while there are ways in which creatures are visible, comprehensible, and expressible in writing, there are ways in which they are not as well. The theological issues at stake are too complex for the way participants in these debates have been deploying language and logic.

The Importance of Immutability

Before we turn to the soteriological implications of my two-*ousiai* proposal in the final chapter, I want to revisit one divine attribute that plays a key role in how the

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[78] See Aquinas, ST I.14.3, "God knows himself as perfectly as he is perfectly knowable."

incarnation is understood. As we saw in Chapter 3, early Christians understood the incarnation to accomplish whatever it accomplished—whether healing, education, or justification—by bringing the divine *ousia* into union with what was in need of correction. In other words, the divine *ousia* must really and truly be brought together with created *ousia*. These soteriological commitments demonstrate why it is important to find a way of understanding something to be permanent about the divine *ousia*, even given the difficulties created by divine transcendence. If we look at the soteriological motivations behind "strong" claims of immutability, we find a concern that if God were capable of changing in any way, then God would not be trustworthy. If this is indeed the reasoning behind the strong view, it would seem to be adequately addressed by the "weak view" of immutability—the belief that divine immutability means divine faithfulness or trustworthiness. This would also correspond to the "intermediate" view of immutability that I alluded to in Chapter 1—the insistence that nothing can make God be other than God, or the assurance that the divine *ousia* will not change into something else. Such an intermediate view of immutability would hold derivatively that God is completely trustworthy, because nothing that happens will turn God into something other than God. God will not cease to value mortal, transient, mutable, interdependent creatures, *no matter what those creatures might do*. To turn against creation would be to become something other than God, and would thus violate both the weak and intermediate notions of immutability. However, this does not require that God could not be involved in the changing world in such a way that God actually experiences the changes that creation undergoes. Nor does it require that God be incapable of suffering alongside God's suffering creatures. If such claims are not required by other Christian commitments, I see

no reason to make them, particularly given the solace that so many suffering Christians have found in their understandings of Christ as their fellow-sufferer. Furthermore, our ecomimetic investigation demonstrates that God values change and mutuality. As we noted, this does not mean that God is mutable, but it does at least weaken the argument that God must be immutable in the "strong" sense. For these reasons, even if we feel bound by tradition to continue to claim that God is immutable, we should not adopt the strong view of immutability. With process theologians we could say that divine *ousia* is immutable because God remains faithful no matter how far astray creation wanders. We can find in the immutability of God the stability that allows creaturely becoming to occur, the faithfulness that prevents change from becoming annihilation. Or we could say that divine *ousia* is immutable because God does not cease to be God no matter what happens within creation. There is no need to claim that God is absolutely incapable of any experiencing any form of change. In this case, the classical understanding of immutability should be modified because scripture, tradition, and reason all indicate that by relating to the world as Creator, God may indeed experience some forms of change.

An ecomimetic interpretation of created *ousia* and of divine valuation demonstrates how anthropocentric assumptions have distorted theological claims about the divine nature. In the incarnation, the Word hypostatically unites the divine source of change and stability with the ever-changing and interdependent being of all that is not God. As a hypostasis of both created and divine *ousiai*, Jesus was localized in time and space while also being everywhere and always in his *ousiai*. He was visible and comprehensible in some ways, while forever exceeding human capacities for perception and understanding in others. He grew and matured as he consumed other material bodies,

transforming them within himself, and he eventually died at the instigation of other material bodies. In other words, he participated in the ongoing processes of transformation with which all created *hypostases* are involved. But none of these processes were able to make him into something other than himself. He was both changing and "immutable" in the weak or intermediate sense: he remained faithful to creation, and to the role of his *hypostasis* within it.

Having examined why it is better to understand the incarnation as the hypostatic union of divine and created *ousia*, we will not turn to how such a union might be understood to affect the created order.

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Cur Deus Creatura?

At the end of the 11th century, Anselm of Canterbury wrote his explanation of the reasons for the incarnation in *Cur Deus Homo*, which translates woodenly to: *Why the God-Human*? Like theologians before and after, Anselm's argument (which we will examine more fully below) was shaped by anthropocentric assumptions about humanity and our relative importance both within the created order and to the divine. In this chapter, I will engage traditional understandings of the work of the incarnation, but I will begin with a different set of assumptions. Rather than assuming that human beings are of exclusive or even primary importance to divine concern for the created realm, I begin with the assumption that all creatures are equally beloved by God. Furthermore, I assume that the effects of the incarnation are neither limited to humanity nor require the mediation of any human being other than Jesus in order to be realized. This does not foreclose the possibility that the incarnation affects different creatures in different ways, and that there might be some effects realized only in human beings or only in particular subsets of humanity, while others are only realized in different creatures. It does set that possibility aside from our primary investigation, however, in order to see what we might be able to discover about the incarnation's relationship to all of creation. We will begin by examining understandings of the incarnation as a response to a problem within creation, and identifying the ways that anthropocentric assumptions have shaped these understandings. Then we will explore how viewing the incarnation as the divine end in itself can de-center theological reflection from humanity. This approach undermines anthropocentric assumptions by viewing creation as an effect of the incarnation, rather

than understanding creation's repair as the motivation for the incarnation. Finally, we will examine what this understanding of the incarnation contributes to debates over the plausibility of the incarnation.

The Work of Christ as a Response to a Problem Within Creation

As we saw in Chapter 3, from the beginning the Christian tradition has used multiple models and mixed metaphors to describe the work of the incarnation. While some have assumed that this indicates that earlier generations possessed an underdeveloped understanding of the incarnation, this proliferation of metaphors is better viewed as reflecting the ultimate inadequacy of all language to convey truth about divinity.[1] Tanner explains that theological discourse uses multiple metaphors as a response to this linguistic inadequacy: "because no set of concepts or images is proper to theology…theology…makes do with whatever categories are at hand, twisting and violating them according to its own fundamentally non-semantic purposes."[2] This begins to explain the proliferation of metaphors that have been used to describe the work of the incarnation. As we saw in Chapter 3, in one brief passage Athanasius invokes metaphors of healing, instruction, and forensic justification to explain the work of the incarnation. The models and metaphors that have been used to describe this work over the past two millennia are many and varied. One commonality that the vast majority possess, however, is that they assume that the incarnation is a response to some problem or deficiency in creation, and this deficiency is almost universally understood as some

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[1] For an example of the first view, see Aulén's argument that historians improperly characterized the "dramatic" model of Atonement "as the first rude beginnings of the theory of the Atonement which was to receive its full and clear expression from Anselm of Canterbury," at least partially because it "is expressed in a variety of forms, not all of which are equally fruitful," Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement*, trans. by A. G. Herbert (New York: The MacMillan Co, 1931) 24 & 22.

[2] Kathryn Tanner, "Creation *ex nihilo* as mixed metaphor," 139.

imperfection in humanity. In this section, we will examine two different approaches to this understanding following Edwin Christian van Driel's division of christologies into two groups: those that see the incarnation as a response to human sin (infralapsarian christologies), and those that see the incarnation as independent of human sin (supralapsarian christologies).[3]

Before we begin this examination, I want to note that most theologians want to affirm the graciousness of the incarnation—that nothing compels the Word to become incarnate. However, explanations of the "causes" for the incarnation seem to undermine this graciousness. Traditional attempts to mitigate this involve distinguishing things that are genuinely "necessary" of the divine and those that are "fitting." For example, the Word is necessarily co-eternal with the Father, because the Father can never be without his Wisdom, but it is fitting for the Word to become incarnate and save humanity from condemnation because it would be unfitting for God's plan for humanity to be unfulfilled. Scott MacDonald explains that Aquinas's use of *causa* in incarnational contexts "might better be rendered by 'explanation,' since the sort of causation he has in mind is not restricted to, and in fact typically is not, efficient causation."[4] In what follows, I do make use of the word "necessary" in reference to divine action, but I qualify each use with an explanation of what it is necessary to achieve. I do this because I find the logic of causal arguments to be useful in understanding the distinctions between different christologies, even though arguments regarding efficient causation cannot be applied univocally to divine action or motivations. Using causal arguments as a heuristic device, we can

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[3] Edwin Chr. van Driel, *Incarnation Anyway: Arguments for Supralapsarian Christology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[4] Scott MacDonald, "Theory of knowledge," in *The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas*, ed. By Norman Kretzmann & Eleonore Stump (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 170.

analyze infralapsarian arguments as understanding sin to be the motivating "cause" of the

incarnation, while most supralapsarian arguments offer alternatives "causes," such as the

perfection of human nature or divine friendship with human beings. This allows us to

take van Driel's analysis a step further by distinguishing the supralapsarian christology of

Karl Barth (and my own proposal) from other supralapsarian arguments. Rather than

offering an alternative "cause" for the incarnation from within the created realm, this

subset of supralapsarian christologies reverse the causal logic, holding that the divine

decision to be incarnate causes the rest of creation to be. This will be more fully

developed below, but for now we should simply note that none of the theologians here

examined view any set of creaturely entities or circumstances to be the cause of the

incarnation *ex necessitate*.

Infralapsarian Christologies

Thomas Aquinas captures the consensus of infralapsarian christologies when he

claims that "had sin not existed, Incarnation would not have been."[5] As Aquinas explains,

this view does not make God's *ability* to become incarnate dependent upon sin, it simply

claims that without sin there would have been no reason for God to do so.[6] Soteriological

models that draw on metaphors of forensic justification, healing, and rescue all explain

the work of the incarnation as a remedy for the postlapsarian human condition.[7] In

Chapter 3 we examined Athanasius's explanation of the reasons for the incarnation, an

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[5] ST III.1.3. Here Aquinas also quotes Augustine as having argued, "if man had not sinned, the Son of Man would not have come," in *De Verbis Apostoli* viii.2.

[6] "And yet the power of God is not limited to this; even had sin not existed, God could have become incarnate," ST III.1.3.

[7] As we shall see, however, those using these models in conjunction with *other* metaphors for the work of Christ would not necessarily assent to Aquinas's and Augustine's proposition that if human beings had not sinned the incarnation would not have occurred. There may be other reasons for the incarnation apart from curing humanity's ills, but the inner logic of these models makes it a response to human sin even though they can be used alongside supralapsarian models.

explanation that was typical of the early church. As we saw, Athanasius argued that in creation human beings received a unique gift and dignity that set us apart from all other creatures. While everything that originates "out of nothing" is mortal and corruptible by nature, God granted human beings "a portion even of the power of his own Word; so that…they might abide ever in blessedness."[8] However, Athanasius argued that human beings "despised and rejected the contemplation of God, and devised and contrived evil for themselves."[9] Because they turned from God's gift and "back to their natural state," human beings became not only corruptible, but actually corrupted, and would "abide in death and corruption" but for some further divine grace.[10] According to Athanasius, God's honor could not allow this because it would be better not to create than to leave what was "once made…to neglect and ruin."[11] However, because God had said that the penalty for sin was death, it would be equally bad to simply preserve humanity from corruption, as this would make God into a liar.[12] Therefore, God's honor required a remedy for humanity's fallen condition that would restore human nature while also satisfying the pronounced penalty for sin.

According to Athanasius, a human act such as repentance would be an insufficient response for two reasons. First, repentance could not undo the initial violation—if human beings did not suffer the penalty for turning from God, then God would still be made a liar. God's justice required that humanity suffer death in consequence of turning from God. Insofar as Athanasius' description of the incarnation focuses on fulfilling the just

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[8] Athanasius, *On the Incarnation of the Word*, in *Christology of the Later Fathers*, ed. by Edward R. Hardy (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1954), 58-59.
[9] Hardy, 59.
[10] Hardy, 59.
[11] Hardy, 61.
[12] Hardy, 60-61.

requirements of the law, it uses a forensic model of justification. However, the second reason that human repentance would be an insufficient response is that it could not undo the corruption that resulted from human sin. At best repentance would prevent future acts of sin.[13] This indicates that in Athanasius's understanding, human nature was fundamentally altered, or injured, by sin. It lost the initial gift of incorruption and became corrupt. Therefore humanity's restoration requires some form of healing that can re-impart the initial gifts that God bestowed on human beings in creation—the share in the Word's own power that preserved them from their natural tendency towards nothingness. In this subsection, we examine three infralapsarian models for understanding the incarnation: healing, forensic justification, and rescuing captive humanity from the power of the devil.

Healing models portray the incarnation as the divine balm applied to corrupt humanity in order to salve its wounds. These models understand human nature to be injured by sin. Human beings are sick and stand in need of a cure. Whether this defect is called illness, injury, or corruption, it has been a widely accepted manner of referring to the postlapsarian human condition.[14] These understandings depend on the understanding that humanity once possessed certain great-making characteristics like incorruptibility, immortality, and right understanding. However, sin injured human nature in such a way that these characteristics were lost. Rather than focusing on divine justice, healing models emphasize divine love and mercy as God's motivation for the incarnation. As Athanasius

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[13] Hardy, 61.

[14] We can see how widely it was accepted by the way Gregory of Nanzianzus used this model as an argument for the full humanity of Christ when he said, "The unassumed is the unhealed, but what is united with God is also being saved," "Letter 101," in *On God and Christ: The Five Theological Orations and Two Letters to Cledonius*, trans. by Lionel Wickham (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002) 158.

claimed, God takes pity on human beings.[15] God intervenes in order to restore what has been taken away.

Gregory of Nyssa drew from a healing model of the incarnation when he called humanity a "sick creature of the earth."[16] He used this metaphor to explain the benefit of the incarnation to those who are suffering in this present life, pointing out that medical practices like surgery and cautery cause temporary pain in order to effect a future cure.[17] Gregory appealed to other physical metaphors that reinforce this model, including the metallurgic metaphor of a refining fire that burns impurities away.[18] In light of the great benefit of being restored to health, Gregory argued that even Satan ("he who first deceived man") had no cause to complain of the incarnation, from which he would also benefit, "For when death came into contact with life, darkness with light, corruption with incorruption, the worse of these things disappeared into a state of nonexistence, to the profit of him who was freed from these evils."[19] These medical metaphors seem to rely entirely upon the hypostatic union to effect human salvation. The Word does not cure humanity by administering a foreign medicine or through surgical intervention, but by actually bringing the divine nature into contact with the nature that is perishing. Only in this way is humanity restored to its original condition.

A similar emphasis on restoration to humanity's original destiny can be seen in models based on forensic justification—which focus on how the incarnation satisfies God's justice. Probably the most developed and influential example of these models can

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[15] Hardy, 58 & 59.
[16] Gregory of Nyssa, "Address on Religious Instruction," in Hardy, *Christology of the Later Fathers*, 305.
[17] Hardy, 304.
[18] Hardy, 303.
[19] Hardy, 303.

be found in Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo*.[20] There Anselm sought to provide a reasonable answer to the question, "by what reason or necessity did God become a human being and, as we believe and profess, restore life to the world by his own death?"[21] Like Athanasius, Anselm explained that the reason for the incarnation can be found in humanity's original destiny and God's honor. According to this argument, God's original purpose in making rational natures was for them to "be happy in enjoying him."[22] To that end, Anselm claimed that human beings were made rational in order to be able to be able to "distinguish between the just and the unjust, between the good and the bad, and between the greater good and the lesser good."[23] This enables us to "choose and love the supreme Good."[24] Based on this destined happiness, Anselm also argued that human beings would be immortal if not for sin, because it is "wretched for a human being to die against his will."[25] He further developed the idea of humanity's original, happy destiny as that of being part of the "heavenly city" that is composed of the perfect number of rational beings, eternally enjoying God.[26]

Sadly, neither humanity's vaunted rationality nor its uniquely dignified destiny was enough to preserve us from sin. Anselm defined sin as "failing to pay back what one owes to God," with the accompanying explanation that what one owes to God is absolute

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[20] Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo*, in *Basic Writings*, trans. & ed. by Thomas Williams (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2007) 237-326.

[21] Anselm, I.1, 245.

[22] Anselm, II.1, 290. For Anselm, rational natures include two types of creatures: human beings and angels. Despite my esteemed advisor's continued promptings to address the role of angels in my understanding of the created order, I will continue to resist being drawn into this conversation. Whatever status angels may have as immaterial created bodies, we have no direct experience of them to include in our theological reflections. Therefore, I will maintain my focus on material bodies, until such time as I receive some sort of data on angelic ones.

[23] Anselm, II.1, 290.

[24] Anselm, II.1, 290.

[25] Anselm, I.9, 255; see also II.2, 291.

[26] Anselm, I.16 & 18, 270 & 267-8. See also Augustine, *City of God*.

obedience, or being "subject to God's will."[27] Any disobedience to God's will amounts to a theft of what is rightfully God's, and therefore dishonors God.[28] In Anselm's feudalistic society based on a system of shame and honor, it was commonly understood that such dishonor could not be remedied simply by restoring what had been taken. Instead, one had to restore what was taken *plus something extra* to pay for the harm done.[29] Therefore, human beings could not be restored to our intended place within the heavenly city without this additional compensation. However, if everything that human beings are and have already belongs to God, then we possess nothing with which to pay the additional compensation.[30] Therefore, we cannot be restored to our original destiny through our own merits.

This creates a divine dilemma—humanity must be restored in order for God's original intention in creation to be fulfilled (and God's intentions cannot be thwarted) but there is no way for human beings to bring about our restoration. This brings the reader to the crux of Anselm's explanation of the incarnation: "no one other than God can make this recompense…But no one other than a human being ought to make it, since otherwise human beings would not make recompense."[31] Therefore, the Word became human and laid down his life as an offering of love "sufficient to discharge the debt that is owed for the sins of the whole world."[32] This offering had to be made by a divine person, because only the divine is worth so much that it could rectify the dishonor done to God through sin. But it had to be made by a human being, because only human beings owed this

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[27] Anselm, I.11, 261.
[28] Anselm, I.11, 262.
[29] Anselm, I.11, 262. There is an illustrative parallel in modern legal systems that allow punitive damages to be assessed in addition to compensatory ones in certain kinds of lawsuits.
[30] Anselm I.20, 279-280.
[31] Anselm, II.6, 293-294.
[32] Anselm, II.14, 307.

compensation to God. In this way, Anselm reflects Chalcedonian christology, arguing that the person who makes this recompense must possess both divine nature and human nature, without either changing into anything other than itself.[33]

Similar justifications of the incarnation are made through another set of metaphors involving humanity's rescue from captivity to sin or the devil.[34] Like forensic models, such rescue models come in many and varied forms, although the primary distinction within this category has to do with the characterization of Christ's work as either a cosmic victory over the devil in some kind of battle, or the less-violent metaphor of Christ's work as a ransom paid to the devil to obtain the release of captive humanity.[35] However, all of these models agree with forensic models that the logically prior motivation for the incarnation is humanity's fallen condition, here characterized as captivity to the devil. In his historical recovery of these models, Gustaf Aulén refers to them as the "dramatic" or "classic" understanding of the atonement (in contrast to "Latin" substitutionary models like Anselm's), although they are often referred to as "*Christus Victor*" models, after Aulén's text by the same name.[36]

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[33] If the divine nature became anything other than divine, then it would not carry the value sufficient to discharge the debt. But if the human nature were anything other than human, it would be incapable of crediting that compensation to humanity's debt.

[34] While these models vary in the ways they speak of sin, the forces of evil, or the more personified devil, these terms function in similar manners across the models. For ease of reference, I will use "the devil" to refer to these (somewhat) interchangeable ideas in the discussion that follows.

[35] Both of these interpretation find scriptural support, see the description of Christ as binding the strong man in Matthew 12:29 & Mark 3:27, and that of Christ as "a ransom for many" in Matthew 20:28 and Mark 10:45. As evidenced by the inclusion of both within each of these gospels, the two descriptions are often used side-by-side by the same author.

[36] Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement*, trans. by A. G. Herbert (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1931).

As Aulén argues, Irenaeus frequently described the work of the incarnation as a victory over the devil, rather than the payment of a debt.[37] As we will discuss more fully below, this is not Irenaeus's only justification for the incarnation, and it does not preclude him from offering supralapsarian explanations of the incarnation as well. However, his understanding of the incarnation did emphasize its function as a response to the consequences of human sin. As Irenaeus explained, human beings were created free and capable of abiding by the divine law.[38] However, the devil, "the apostate angel and the enemy," was jealous of the first human beings and led them into sin in order to sow enmity between them and God.[39] Because human beings were made for life, our captivity to sin and death threatens the divine ordering of creation if it is not rectified:

> the whole economy of salvation regarding man came to pass according to the good pleasure of the Father, in order that God might not be conquered, nor His wisdom lessened, [in the estimation of His creatures.] For if man, who had been created by God that he might live, after losing life, through being injured by the serpent that had corrupted him, should not any more return to life, but should be utterly [and for ever] abandoned to death, God would [in that case] have been conquered, and the wickedness of the serpent would have prevailed over the will of God.[40]

Thus, sin and humanity's resulting captivity to the devil requires a divine rescue in order to preserve God's honor.

Irenaeus used two metaphors to describe this rescue: one of violent contest and the other of fulfillment of the requirements of divine justice. He did not keep these images distinct but allowed them to blend into one another. According to several

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[37] I am indebted to Aulén's text for informing my own understanding of several soteriological models, but what follows is less an engagement with his analysis (which is concerned with how *this* model can be understood as an unique understanding of atonement) and more a sketch of the contours of this model.

[38] Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, IV.39.3.

[39] Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, IV.40.3.

[40] Irenaues, *Against Heresies*, III.23.1.

passages in *Against Heresies*, the Lord fought and defeated the devil: "He fought and conquered; for He was a man contending for the fathers;" "by means of the second man did He bind the strong man, and spoiled his goods;" and "the Word bound him securely as a fugitive from Himself, and made spoil of his goods—namely, those men whom he held in bondage, and whom he unjustly used for his own purposes."[41] Despite this pugilistic imagery, however, Irenaeus argued that this victory was not violent:

> The Word of God, powerful in all things, and not defective with regard to His own justice, did righteously turn against that apostasy, and redeem from it His own property, *not by violent means*, as the [apostasy] had obtained dominion over us at the beginning, when it insatiably snatched away what was not its own, *but by means of persuasion*, as became a God of counsel, *who does not use violent means to obtain what He desires*; so that neither should justice be infringed upon, nor the ancient handiwork of God go to destruction.[42]

Instead, the Word redeemed humanity "through His own blood, giving His soul for our souls, and His flesh for our flesh."[43] While this language invokes a ransom metaphor, in which the Word's death served as an exchange for humanity's release, Irenaeus also indicated that the non-violent victory was won through the Word's obedience. Irenaeus expanded the Pauline argument that "just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous" (Rom 5:19; see also 1 Cor 15:21) to demonstrate that Christ's entire life of obedience effected this rescue, rather than focusing only on his death or resurrection.[44] In the incarnation, "God recapitulated in Himself the ancient formation of man, that He might kill sin, deprive death of its power, and vivify man."[45] This model of a non-violent

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[41] *Against Heresies*, III.18.6, 23.1; V.21.3.
[42] *Against Heresies*, V.1.1 (emphasis added).
[43] *Against Heresies*, V.1.1, "the mighty Word...gave Himself as a redemption for those who had been led into captivity."
[44] *Against Heresies*, III.18.7, 21.10.
[45] *Against Heresies*, III.18.7.

victory over the devil through obedience lays the soteriological groundwork for later conciliar christology.

This *Christus Victor* model requires that Jesus be both truly divine and truly human, "for unless man had overcome the enemy of man, the enemy would not have been legitimately vanquished. And…unless it had been God who had freely given salvation, we could never have possessed it securely."[46] Irenaeus asserted that this union was necessary for Christ's victory over the devil to be efficacious for humanity, but the gifts of that union imply that the incarnation does more than simply release human beings from captivity. It also recalls humanity to incorruption while destroying death, error, and ignorance.[47] It causes "human nature to cleave to and to become one with God."[48] Although Athanasius argued that God instilled true knowledge of God in humanity's creation and that it was through sin that such knowledge was lost, Irenaeus believed that humanity was created imperfect and destined for future growth.[49] This belief allowed Irenaeus to offer a supralapsarian explanation for the incarnation, in addition to his infralapsarian arguments.

Supralapsarian Christologies I: Anthropocentric Models

Because Irenaeus affirmed these various motivations for the incarnation, his christology serves as a helpful bridge between infralapsarian and supralapsarian christologies. As van Driel points out, "Most supralapsarian theologies turn on a distinction between the incarnation as the primal and essential goal of God's relationship

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[46] *Against Heresies*, III.18.7.
[47] *Against Heresies*, II.20.3.
[48] *Against Heresies*, III.18.7.
[49] *Against Heresies*, IV.38.1.

with humankind, and sin and redemption as its accidental companions."[50] Irenaeus

incorporated both understandings. He certainly understood redemption as an integral

work of the incarnation, but he also understood the incarnation as necessary for the

consummation of humanity in the true knowledge of God:

> For in no other way could we have learned the things of God, unless our Master, existing as the Word, had become man. For no other being had the power of revealing to us the things of the Father, except His own proper Word…Again, we could have learned in no other way than by seeing our Teacher, and hearing His voice with our own ears, that, having become imitators of His works as well as doers of His words, we may have communion with Him.[51]

Furthermore, Irenaeus argued that the incarnation was necessary for the fulfillment of

human destiny, which includes our ultimate glorification: "For it was for this end that the

Word of God was made man, and He who was the Son of God became the Son of man,

that man, having been taken into the Word, and receiving the adoption, might become the

son of God."[52] This notion that God became human in order that humans might become

divine offers a motive for the incarnation that is independent of sin. Even if human beings

had not sinned, the incarnation would have been necessary to teach human beings the

truth about God and to enable humanity's adoption as children of God. While his model

of Christ's work as a rescue from the devil demonstrates infralapsarian reasoning,

Irenaeus's use of other models in tandem with that of rescue indicates his belief that the

incarnation would have been necessary to fulfill God's intentions for humanity, even if

human beings had not sinned.[53]

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[50] Van Driel, 9.

[51] *Against Heresies*, V.1.1.

[52] *Against Heresies*, III.19.1. See also Athanasius, "For he was made man that we might be made God," *On the Incarnation*, in Hardy, 107.

[53] It is difficult to find many fully-developed understandings of the incarnation that do not incorporate both infralapsarian and supralapsarian explanations of its work. The distinction is generally based on the primary emphasis, rather than an absolute rejection of one or the other modes of explanation.

If the incarnation brings about something more than merely a restoration to humanity's prelapsarian state, then infralapsarian christologies are problematic, because they seem to make the greatest good contingent on human sin.[54] Van Driel ably summarizes this critique of the concept of *felix culpa* (or "happy fall"), when he argues that "it is *improprie* to the nature of the good to hold that the good needs the bad in order to be needed, recognized, or received."[55] As he argues, the eschaton *is* greater than humanity's origins, and for any who concur with this assertion, infralapsarian christologies claim "that God needs evil in order to bring out good, which is repugnant to the excellence of the good."[56] In contrast, supralapsarian christologies find their roots in Irenaeus's understanding that creation was made good, but not perfect. They assume that there was no pre-Fall golden age of human perfection. Even before human beings sinned, they still lacked something that would be necessary to fulfill their ultimate destiny. Supralapsarian christologies understand the incarnation as having always been necessary for the perfection of human beings, even apart from whatever damage was wrought by sin. The incarnation was always the divine means intended for the eschatological consummation of creation.

As noted earlier, the distinction between these models can be illuminated by way of analogy to causal arguments. For infralapsarian christologies, human sin is the motivation for the incarnation. It thus occasions the incarnation. Any claim that one thing

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[54] Aquinas responds directly to this objection in ST.III.1.3 (Reply to Objection 3): "But there is no reason why human nature should not have been raised to something greater after sin. For God allows evils to happen in order to bring a greater good therefrom; hence it is written (Romans 5:20): "Where sin abounded, grace did more abound." Hence, too, in the blessing of the Paschal candle, we say: "O happy fault, that merited such and so great a Redeemer!"

[55] Van Driel, *Incarnation Anyway*, 131.

[56] Van Driel, 151.

is *the* cause of another makes two implicit assumptions.[57] The first is that there is not a different cause, one which either severs the causal relationship between the first two events entirely, or explains them both as the result of this alternative cause. In this section, we will see how both Isaak Dorner's and van Driel's own christology understand the "cause" of the incarnation to be the perfection of God's relationship with humanity, thus severing any causal connection to sin as such. In contrast, we will see how Friedrich Schleiermacher argues that God's will for humanity's perfection "causes" *both* sin and the incarnation. The second assumption of causal arguments is that incarnation is always viewed as an effect of some other divine design rather than a cause it its own right (e.g., that the incarnation did not "cause" creation). In the next section, we will see how Karl Barth disputed this convention by developing a "reversed causation" argument, in which God's will for humanity as such is the result of God's primordial decision to assume flesh, rather than its cause. Because my purpose here is not to adopt or defend any one of these christological proposals, but rather to examine different ways of addressing the "work" of the incarnation, I will use van Driel's sketches of each to tease out these differences.

The nineteenth-century German theologian Isaak Dorner posited that the divine motivation for the incarnation could be found in God's love, properly characterized as *amor amoris*, love of love itself.[58] According to this understanding of divine love, it "finds its delight in multiplying, aggrandizing the life of love, in forming a kingdom of

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[57] Alternatively, one may also argue that one thing is a contributing cause and allow room for other contributing causes. As we have seen, Irenaeus did so in alleging both infralapsarian and supralapsarian explanations of the work of the incarnation.

[58] Van Driel, 41.

love."[59] Because Dorner understands love as an ethical relationship, the creation of

human beings can be seen as an expression of this divine love, which requires an object

to be loved as well as a subject capable of responding to that love.[60] Dorner's

understanding of the ethical mandates that the ethical "can be had only by an act of self-

involvement," therefore Dorner's anthropology must make room for human beings to

have some "notion of freedom vis-à-vis God" even while we are absolutely dependent

upon God for existence.[61] Creation of human freedom, including the human ability to sin,

is the result of God's goal of having a creature capable of entering into an ethical

relationship of love. This goal also explains the incarnation: it is God's presentation of

Godself to human beings as an object for our love, "objectively, the ethical good needs to

'be placed before the eyes in its full clearness and truth…in its most lucid and attractive

form as personal love.'"[62] The incarnation is this confrontation of humanity with God's

love in its personal form.[63]

     For Dorner, the incarnation is "the fulfillment of the divine goal: to extend the life

of love" through the "confrontation of the human being with the incarnate life."[64] Van

Driel makes a similar argument in his own constructive proposal, using the metaphor of

divine friendship to explain the motivation behind the incarnation. For van Driel, "God's

ultimate goal is to be a friend to his creatures."[65] This motivates God to become

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[59] Isaak Dorner, *System der Christlichen Glaubenslehre*, 1st ed. (Berlin: W. Herz, 1879-81), 2nd ed. (Berlin, 1883), Translated in *A System of Christian Doctrine*, II, 14, cited in van Driel, 41.

[60] Van Driel, 42.

[61] Van Driel, 36 & 42.

[62] Van Driel, 49, citing Dorner, *SCD* III, 70.

[63] Van Driel poses that the incarnation is also necessary because humanity's bondage by original sin stands in the way of the freedom necessary for a true ethical choice, 49. However, this infralapsarian justification for the incarnation is secondary to Dorner's primary argument, and unnecessary for this model to proceed, so we will not pursue it further here.

[64] Van Driel, 51 & 52.

[65] Van Driel, 162.

physically present to creation, and "The incarnation can be interpreted as God making Godself ultimately available, by offering the friendship in a mode previously not present—visible, tangible, available in human form, and with a human face."[66] From this brief examination of these christologies, we can discern the logic of alternative causation: the incarnation is the result of God's desire for a relationship of love with God's creatures.[67] This desire is the cause, not only of the incarnation, but also of creation itself. God both creates and becomes incarnate within that creation as expressions of the expanding nature of divine love or friendship. Within the structure of this argument we also find some explanation of sin rooted in this divine impulse. Because some degree of freedom is necessary for the voluntary self-involvement of any ethical action, the possibility of sin is also the result of God's desire for such a relationship. Van Driel develops this idea that God's desire for relationship with creation might be the cause of both the incarnation *and sin* more fully in conversation with Friedrich Schleiermacher.

Van Driel argues that for Schleiermacher, the motivation for the incarnation is the consummation of creation: forming the kingdom of God by "the communication of the divine to all."[68] This connects directly to Schleiermacher's understanding of piety as "the consciousness of being absolutely dependent, or, which is the same thing, of being in relation with God."[69] We will only have fully received this communication of the divine when we possess an uninterrupted God-consciousness. While Schleiermacher holds that a feeling of "absolute dependence is an essential feature of human kind, it is also a

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[66] Van Driel, 162.

[67] As van Driel describes it, "This friendship is not based on the divine desire to reconcile estranged humanity; it is the other way around—the divine desire to reconcile strayed humanity is based on, and therefore logically follows, divine friendship," 162.

[68] Van Driel, 23.

[69] Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. by H. R. Mackintosh & J. S. Stewart, (London: T & T Clark, 1999) §4, 12.

universal experience that this consciousness is hampered in its development."[70] As van

Driel explains, whatever hampers this God-consciousness is what must be overcome in

order for creation to reach its consummation. In Schleiermacher's understanding, this

obstruction can be described as sin, and it is the work of the Redeemer to overcome such

obstructions and usher in perfect God-consciousness.[71] Through his own ideal God-

consciousness, Jesus ushers in this condition, which other human beings can participate

in through their relation to Christ.[72] However, a consciousness of sin is needed to make

human beings "receptive to the Redeemer."[73] This complicates the relationship between

the incarnation and sin—there would be no need for redemption without sin, but sin is

only ordained in order to make human beings receptive to the Redeemer. Van Driel is

able to characterize Schleiermacher's christology as supralapsarian because of the way he

relates both sin and the incarnation to God's primal intention.

     For Schleiermacher, the divine attribute of omnipotence makes the question of

"Would the Redeemer have come if human beings had not sinned?" nonsensical.

Schleiermacher claims that "the divine causality…is completely presented in the totality

of finite being, and consequently everything for which there is a causality in God happens

and becomes real."[74] As van Driel explains, this means that "there is no alternative for

reality as it is. Things cannot be otherwise than the way they are."[75] The one divine will

is the cause of creation, of sin, and of the incarnation. Under this reasoning, sin is not the

cause of the incarnation, but the divine willing is the alternative cause of *both* sin *and* the

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[70] Van Driel, 17.
[71] Van Driel, 17.
[72] Van Driel, 21.
[73] Van Driel, 24.
[74] Schleiermacher, §54, 211.
[75] Van Driel, 12.

incarnation.[76] As van Driel explains, "God's primal intention is the most complete

impartation of the divine essence to humanity."[77] However, this primal intention is

accomplished through human consciousness of sin and the need for the Redeemer, as

well as through the incarnation as that Redeemer. Thus, sin does not cause the

incarnation, rather the divine intent to give this gift to humanity causes both sin and the

incarnation.

Both Schleiermacher and Dorner provide ways of understanding the incarnation

as the result of something other than human sin. However, in both cases, the motivation

for the incarnation is God's desire to bring *humanity* to its consummation, which Dorner

characterizes as an ethical relationship of mutual love with the divine, and

Schleiermacher presents as a state of absolute God-consciousness, unmarred by self-

consciousness. While both undermine the idea that the incarnation is solely a remedy for

human sin, neither corrects the anthropocentric distortions that underlie the christologies

that we have examined thus far.

From these representative models of both supra- and infralapsarian christologies,

we can see that traditional understandings of the incarnation have been heavily influenced

by anthropocentric assumptions about the original dignity, primary importance, and final

destiny of human beings. From Athanasius' initial claims that God gave a special gift to

human beings by creating us (alone of all creatures) in God's own image, to Augustine

and Anselm's claims that human beings are destined for residence in the heavenly city,

we find the assumption that human beings are qualitatively different from all other

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[76] Note that Schleiermacher does not hedge by making the divine will the cause of the possibility of sin inherent in sin. He does not shy from acknowledging that under his system, God actually is the author of sin. See van Driel, 16, Schleiermacher, 325, 333-334.

[77] Van Driel, 24.

members of creation.[78] Furthermore, infralapsarian models reveal their anthropocentric preoccupations even when they focus on human debasement: sin is almost always considered a possibility only for rational creatures. Although it might seem that focusing on a uniquely human failure to abide by God's will might undermine anthropocentrism by focusing on the great humiliation of humanity, it has tended to paradoxically reaffirm assumptions about humanity's superior dignity. As we saw with *felix culpa* arguments, there are even impulses to valorize sin as a "happy fault" that merits the greatest good.

Although supralapsarian christologies tend to avoid instrumentalizing sin, this does not mean that they avoid anthropocentric biases. Most supralapsarian christologies emphasize the further development (or even divinization) of human beings, focusing on the development of uniquely human characteristics. We can see this in Dorner's focus on *human freedom* as the basis for ethical relationships, and in Schleiermacher's emphasis on *God-consciousness* as the ultimate goal of creation. The Athanasian claim that "God became (hu)man so that (hu)man might become God," is patently anthropocentric, and based upon an assumed qualitative distinction between human beings and other members of creation. While none of the christologies we have examined require anthropomonic interpretations of the work of the incarnation (many interpreters argue that the benefits received by humanity are thereby mediated to other parts of creation), they do necessarily reinforce anthropocentric assumptions by making salvation of the rest of creation contingent upon human salvation.[79] While supralapsarian christologies open the

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[78] I continue to exclude angels from consideration here and in what follows. I know that Anselm and Augustine both understood angels (at least, unfallen ones) to be similarly destined for the heavenly city, but they play a remarkably small role in modern understandings of humanity's final destiny.

[79] These interpretations find Pauline support in Romans 8:19-21: "For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God." Even this darling text of

possibility for a less anthropocentric understanding of the incarnation, they generally have not offered one. I posit that the reason for this is that they have continued to view the incarnation as a means to an end, rather than as the divine end in itself.

Supralapsarian Christologies II: Reversing Causation

All of the christologies examined thus far have characterized the incarnation as a means to another divine end, and that end has been understood anthropocentrically as the perfection of humanity. For infralapsarian christologies, this end centers on countermeasures to remedy the damage done to humanity through sin. Even though supralapsarian christologies insist that the incarnation is not merely a response to human sin, the ones we have examined thus far still view it as a means for the perfection of humanity. In this section, we will explore ways of reversing the causal relationship between humanity and the incarnation. Rather than examining what in human nature or human history "causes" the incarnation, we will explore the possibility that the incarnation itself constitutes or causes human existence and history.

Karl Barth

We will begin this exploration by engaging Karl Barth's christology, which challenges our linear understandings of time and causality in a manner that lays the foundation for my own proposal.[80] Next we will examine van Driel's critique of Barth's

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ecotheology reinforces anthropocentric assumptions about the elevated role of human beings in the salvation of creation.

[80] Despite the merit I find in Barth's proposal, I am well aware of his anthropocentrism. Barth's anthropocentric tendencies enable him to marginalize the created world, "That other to which God stands in relationship…*is not simply and directly the created world as such*. There is, *too*, a relationship of God to the world…*this history has no independent signification*. It takes place in the interests of the primal history which is played out between God and this one man and His people. It is the sphere in which this primal history is played out," *Church Dogmatics*, *Volume II: The Doctrine of God, Part 2*, ed. by G. W. Bromiley & T. F. Torrance (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, Marketing, LLC, 1995), II.2,§32.I, 7-8 (emphasis added).

metaphysics in order to see the relationship between primary and secondary *ousia* more

clearly. Finally, I will propose an understanding of the incarnation that brings Barth's

logic into conversation with the ecomimetic understanding of created *ousia* proposed in

the previous chapter.[81]

Barth's argument, painfully condensed, is that God's decision to be for another

(i.e. God's election of what is other than God) expresses God's intra-Trinitarian being,

constitutes creation, and is grounded in the primordial decision to become incarnate.

First, Barth understands God's intra-Trinitarian being as a self-sufficient community of

love. As he explains, God,

> had no need of a creation. He might well have been satisfied with the inner glory
> of His threefold being, His freedom, and His love. The fact that He is not
> satisfied, but that His inner glory overflows and becomes outward, the fact that
> He wills the creation…is grace, sovereign grace, a condescension inconceivably
> tender.[82]

In line with Christian tradition, Barth preserves the wholly gracious nature of creation by

affirming its absolutely contingent nature. Like many before him, Barth argues that God

has the fullness of relationship, including the necessary recipients of God's love, within

God's own triune self. God is under no obligation or compulsion to create that which is

not God, and therefore this creation is entirely an act of grace.

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[81] In this final step, I will separate Barth's christological claims from their anthropocentric assumptions. For example, Barth's thesis for II.2 §32 says that the doctrine of election is part of the doctrine of God, "because originally God's election *of man* is a predestination *not merely of man* but of Himself." CD II.2, 3. When brought into conversation with the concept of created *ousia*, this claim can be restated thus: "because originally God's election of creation is a predestination not merely of creation but of God's self."
[82] CD II.2, 121. There is debate, which I will try to avoid here in order to explore more fully in a later work, over whether the incarnation is a free expression of God's intra-trinitarian life or actually constitutive of God's self. The theological stakes are high, because if it is constitutive of God's self this would jeopardize the contingency of creation, and thereby in some way impair the "freeness" of the gift. See Bruce McCormack, "Grace and Being," in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. by John Webster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 92-110, and "Seek God where he may be found: a response to Edwin Chr. van Driel," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 60(1):62-79 (2007). See also van Driel, *Incarnation Anyway*, 90-105.

Despite this self-sufficiency, God does create. For Barth, creation is grounded in divine election, in God's will to be with and for God's creature.[83] It is a divine outpouring of love in which God relates God's self to what is not God,

> God in His love elects another to fellowship with Himself. First and foremost this means that God makes a self-election in favour of this other. He ordains that He should not be entirely self-sufficient as He might be…He constitutes Himself as benefit or favour. And in so doing He elects another as an object of His love.[84]

Although nothing forces God to make this election, in it, God chooses to constrain Godself and become a companion to God's creature. But it is not as if God encounters another and decides to become a companion to it. As Barth argues, Christian theology does not have to do with a divine being who first decides to create a world and then decides to enter into a relationship with it. God's election is the "meaning and content" of creation.[85] Creation only exists as a consequence of divine election.

For Barth, however, this election is not primarily of creation, or even of humanity. Rather, it is the election of one particular man, Jesus of Nazareth. For Barth, the whole history of God and the created world "has no independent signification. It takes place in the interests of the primal history which is played out between God and *this one man* and his people."[86] This man is Jesus Christ, who is "the decision of God in favour of this attitude of relation [of covenant]. He is himself the relation."[87] Jesus is the one that God elects, and it is only through him and in him that others are also elected.[88] This is why

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[83] CD, II.2, 43.
[84] CD, II.2, 10
[85] CD, II.2, 54.
[86] CD, II.2, 8, (emphasis added).
[87] CD II.2, 7.
[88] CD, II.2, 43

Barth argues that Christian theology must begin with the incarnation, with the person Jesus Christ, as the divine self-revelation:

> and not with general principles, however better, or, at any rate, more relevant and illuminating, they may appear to be: as though He were a continuation of the knowledge and Word of God, and not its root and origin, not indeed the very Word of God itself. Theology must also end with Him, and not with supposedly self-evident general conclusions from what is particularly enclosed and disclosed in Him…as though in the things of God there were anything general which we could know and designate in addition to and even independently of this particular.[89]

From this perspective, the coherence debates discussed in the last chapter are themselves incoherent, because they start in the wrong place. The Word is incarnate, and so the theological question should be, "What does the incarnation disclose about God?" rather than, "How can a being possess divine characteristics and yet become incarnate?"[90] For Barth, God is known *only* as the electing God, God willing to be for another.

In thus circling back from creation to election to incarnation, Barth collapses the linear understanding of salvation history. According to traditional linear understandings, God creates, then becomes incarnate in response to some problem within creation, and then in that incarnation elects certain people. This creates a soteriological problem that has plagued both infralapsarian and other supralapsarian christologies because an effect cannot precede its cause in a linear understanding. Therefore, human beings from Adam to the birth of Christ could not receive whatever benefits the incarnation brought.[91] Barth

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[89] CD, II.2, 4.

[90] We can see this at work in Barth's discussion of predestination and omnipotence: "We must also assert that we do not exhaustively define or describe God when we identify Him with irresistible omnipotence. Indeed, if we make this identification *in abstracto*, we do not define or describe God at all. Irresistible omnipotence cannot be made the beginning and the end of the being of God…May it not be that is as the electing God that He is the Almighty, and not *vice versa*?" CD II.2, 45.

[91] One proposed solution to this problem is based on an understanding of the work of Christ as redemption from hell. This view allows the forensic or pedagogical work of Christ to be retroactively effective for those who have already died through his post-crucifixion and pre-resurrection preaching to the damned in hell. See 1 Peter 3:18-20: "For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in

addresses this problem by placing the election of Jesus Christ at the beginning of history,

holding that all of history that preceded the birth of Jesus of Nazareth was represented in

him just as all of history following that birth has been and will be. As Barth explains,

> in this name we may now discern the divine decision as an event in human history *and therefore as the substance of all the preceding history* of Israel *and the hope of all the succeeding history* of the Church. What happened was this, that under this name God Himself became man, that He became this particular man, and as such the Representative of the whole people that hastens towards this man and derives from Him. What happened was this, that *under this name God Himself realized in time, and therefore as an object of human perception*, the self-giving of Himself as the Covenant-partner of the people *determined by him from and to all eternity*.[92]

In this understanding, the work of the incarnation is primarily being the Covenant-partner

elected by God and electing God in return. Only secondarily are the effects of the

incarnation manifested in other human beings and in creation more widely. This means

that we are elected by God before we exist, that we are created in order for God to be a

companion to us. This makes the incarnation the foundation of created existence, which

only exists for the purpose of Jesus's life and election by God.

Primary and Secondary Substance

Van Driel raises the question of whether the Word, in the incarnation, assumes a

primary or secondary substance.[93] He argues that the issue of whether the incarnation has

to do with the Word's incarnation as a particular human being (primary substance) or as

humanity in general (secondary substance) shapes how we understand the effects of the

incarnation. He further argues that Barth is imprecise in his distinction between the two.

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order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, *in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison*, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah…in which a few…were saved through water" (emphasis added). For reasons that should be apparent by this point, I find this noetic explanation of Christ's work unpersuasive.
[92] CD, II.2. 53, emphasis added.
[93] CD, IV.2, 106, cited in van Driel, 107.

If the incarnation involves "human nature," then "God is able to change the ontological status of humanity from the inside out."[94] Alternatively, if it involves a particular human being, then "God makes Godself available for interpersonal interactions from one human being to the other."[95] Van Driel's own christological proposal, which understands the work of the incarnation as enabling divine friendship with creatures, focuses on the particularity of the incarnation: only by becoming one particular person can the Word make God present and available for relationship with human beings.[96] He argues that the alternative, that the incarnation involves the Word's assumption of human nature (secondary substance) would undermine the "over-againstness" or the "I-thou difference" that grounds such a relationship.[97] Therefore, van Driel finds the language of assumption and discussions of the "human nature" of Christ unhelpful. Considering my critique of the concept of human nature in Chapter 3, this might seem like an attractive option for my own proposal. However, I find the concept of "human nature" problematic because of its exclusivity, not because I object entirely to the concept of secondary substance.

My objection to the way substance metaphysics has been used is that philosophers and theologians have differentiated secondary substances into many different categories, categories that our understandings of evolution and interdependence now call into question. They treat human nature as a separate secondary substance from that possessed by other creatures (human nature as opposed to cod nature or oak nature). However, in Chapter 4 we examined a more inclusive way to conceive of shared substance that does not create artificial boundaries between different material bodies on the basis of

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[94] Van Driel, 166.
[95] Van Driel, 166.
[96] Van Driel, 163.
[97] Van Driel, 141.

anthropocentric valuations. The concept of created *ousia* stresses that there is something metaphysically fundamental shared by *all* created beings. However, this does not diminish the particularity of individual created beings. It also does not create the barrier to interpersonal relationship that van Driel imagines, so long as we do not insist that one substance, the primary or the secondary, must be "more real" than the other.

The general does not exist without two or more particulars, but neither do two or more particulars exist without the general. Both are real, and neither can assume a conceptual priority over the others. But neither concept would be strictly applicable to a single entity, entirely alone. It would not be a particular instantiation of any generality, nor would there be any generality to be made about that single entity. But once there is multiplicity of some kind, then there are some things that the multiple entities share—the general—and some things that they do not—the particular. Neither needs to be considered more or less real than the other. Under this reasoning, in the incarnation the Word partakes of created *ousia* as a particular human being—"assuming" both a primary substance in all of its hypostatic particularity, and a secondary substance in all of its interdependent relationality. On the basis of this understanding of primary and secondary substances, we will now examine how the incarnation relates to both the particularity of primary substances and the interdependence of secondary substances.

Incarnation and the Two Ousiai

Barth's description of election as the divine will to be for another is related to Dorner's understanding of divine love as *amor amoris*, and to van Driel's understanding of the divine goal as being a friend to God's creatures. After all, "willing to be for another" is an apt definition for the love that lies at the heart of friendship. But "willing to

be for another" when no other exists, "willing to be for another" in such a way that the other is called into being, is the divine prerogative. Creatures can be for others that already exist, but only the divine can actually constitute another through this willing. Divine love as the "willing to be for another" is the foundation of creation *ex nihilo*. But if Christianity is going to continue to affirm the absolutely gracious nature of material creation, then this divine will to be for another must be satisfied without recourse to the world as a necessary object of divine love. This can be done by following Barth's assertion that divine election applies primarily to the incarnation, and to creation only derivatively, "in, through, and for" the incarnate One.

This relates to the category of created *ousia* because this secondary substance is created through the incarnation. The incarnation is the event in which the Word becomes another for God, and in which the other for which God can "be for" comes into existence. This event creates the secondary substance of created *ousia*, that which is not God. Divine love as it is manifest in the calling forth of created *ousia*, hypostasized in the incarnation, means that ontological multiplicity exists, that God is not God alone, but is with and for God's creature. This means that the foundation of created *ousia* is multiplicity—*being* another—and interdependence—being *for* another. With such a foundation, created *ousia* does not exist in a solitary entity, but reverberates in the creation of light and dark, of sea and land, of the billions of creatures teeming in the water, over the land, and in the air.

According to this understanding, everything that is created, i.e. everything other than God, derives its being from God's will to be for another. Nothing has existence on any other basis. God's will to be for another is enacted in the incarnation, which grounds

all other extra-divine relationships. The incarnation is the expression of that divine will: the Word becomes another for the Father by partaking in created *ousia*. But the incarnation is not just the assumption of another substance, as though created *ousia* had some existence before the Word assumed it. Created *ousia* is called into being from nothing in the Word's assumption of it. The incarnation thus creates created *ousia*. As the created manifestation of divine love, this *ousia* is also "for another." It does not exist in isolation, but is fruitful and multiplies in countless different trajectories as it becomes the myriad of particular created bodes that all share in this being for others.

Plausibility Challenges

As we saw in Chapter 4, this understanding of created *ousia* problematizes the coherence debates without directly answering the challenges raised therein. The case is different with challenges to the plausibility of the universal and eternal significance of the incarnation of the Word as one particular creature in one particular time and place. As I noted in Chapter 1, those raising such challenges are often addressing significant problems with ways that the incarnation has traditionally been understood. The particularity of the incarnation has been used to argue (1) that salvation is limited to those who accept certain theological claims, (2) that people who possess certain characteristics possessed by Jesus are superior to those who do not, and (3) that human beings are more important to God than are other creatures. However, I would argue that each of these developments reflects understandings of the incarnation distorted by anthropocentrism, androcentrism, and egotism, and that they can all be rejected without undermining the doctrine of the incarnation.

As I argued in Chapter 3, partaking in created *ousia* is the soteriologically significant "characteristic" of Jesus. That he was a human being does not convey theological priority on humanity over and against other members of creation. I realize that this flies in the face of a long philosophical and theological tradition that far predates Christianity, and that assumes that humanity is real category that is ontologically different from, and superior to, other creatures. However, this tradition has been shaped from the beginning by anthropocentric assumptions. If we set aside those assumptions, and begin instead by assuming that God loves *all creatures*, then there is no need to attach particular soteriological significance to Jesus's humanity. The tradition has had no problem dismissing most of the personal characteristics of Jesus as soteriologically insignificant. The number of hairs on his head, the color and shape of his eyes, the length of his neck, and the height of his body are all characteristics that Christianity has traditionally ignored. The language he spoke, his spatial reasoning abilities, his mathematical understanding, and his sense of humor have likewise been considered irrelevant to his theological significance. Other characteristics, however have been prioritized: his maleness, his humanity, and his rationality. If we were to examine the gatekeepers of the tradition, we might find some reason for this inconsistent treatment of Jesus's personal characteristics. All the theologians of the tradition are themselves rational human beings, and the vast majority of them have been male. However, they have had varying amounts hair, different colors of eyes, different heights. They have spoken different languages and had different intellectual gifts and personality traits. Because of the variety of these characteristics within their own primary group of interlocutors, theologians conceded that those characteristics were not essential to the

work of the incarnation. But because they were all rational humans, and nearly all men, they emphasized these characteristics as possessing soteriological significance. The role of implicit biases in these assumptions should be clear.

In Chapter 3, I followed feminist theologians who challenged the androcentric prioritization of maleness in order to raise a similar challenge to the anthropocentric prioritization of humanity. The theologically significant personal characteristic of Jesus that affects for whom, or what, the incarnation is effective is his created *ousia*. The rest of his personal characteristics are what combine to make him a particular instantiation of that *ousia*. That particular combination of characteristics belongs to him alone; it is not shared with any other creature. Therefore, the particularity of the incarnation does not justify the claims that men, or Westerners, or any other group is more significant, or more closely related to the divine, than any other group of creatures. My two-*ousiai* understanding of the incarnation cannot be used to justify patriarchal oppression, Western colonialism, anthropocentric exploitation of nature, or any other form of oppression by one group of creatures over another on the basis of their supposed superiority to other members of creation.

While most Christians have come to see that patriarchal oppression and Western colonialism are not justified by the incarnation, many still find the limited revelation of the incarnation to be unjust. This concern is tied to the belief that the incarnation is effective only for those who have accepted certain theological propositions. Some people have heard about the story of Jesus, while others have not. Some people are socio-culturally situated in a way that promotes their believing that story and finding it life-giving, others are not. Some people have the capacity to understand and respond to the

story, others do not. If the primary work of the incarnation is pedagogical, either to teach creatures how to be better, or to teach them how to know God, then these limitations do undermine our concepts of justice.[98] If God condemns those creatures that do not believe certain things or follow certain rules for behavior, but only reveals the things to be believed or the rules to be obeyed to some, then God is not acting in ways we understand as fair. I concur with these objections up to this point. But my understanding of the incarnation does not turn on revelation or cognitive appropriation of that revelation. In the understanding proposed in this work, the incarnation grants existence and God's companionship to all of creation, which includes all that existed "prior" to the birth of Jesus as well as all that exists "after" his ascension. It applies to those disciples that traveled and talked and ate with him, and it applies to the atoms that existed in the reaches of space farthest from him. If the incarnation gives creation both existence and God's friendship, then it is not given to an already-existing world, as though it were an intervention to fix some imperfection with creation. It is the foundation of existence as such. It is the gift given to that which does not exist, which constitutes its very existence. Every moment that anything "is," it is only as this gift.

Because this model avoids connecting the effects of the incarnation to cognitive appropriation of it as revelation, it avoids the justice issues raised against limited revelation. The benefits of the incarnation are immediately available to all things that partake in created *ousia* without the mediation of rational acceptance. Although this

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[98] One traditional response to this charge is that existence itself is a gift, and we can therefore have no claims of justice on God. I.e. if God chooses to create some creatures and not save (or even condemn) them, that is no violation of justice. While there is legal merit to such an argument, it does not respond to the ethical impulse behind these objections, nor does it provide the most fruitful manner of understanding God.

understanding addresses the particularity challenges examined in Chapter 1, it does so by raising some significant challenges of its own to traditional understandings of both sin and salvation which I hope to explore more fully in a later project. If the work of the incarnation has been accomplished in creation, then how can we understand the evil we perceive in this world? How can we understand salvation? What is the point of Jesus's instruction to "Go and make disciples"? Without going into a full development of how my proposal impacts understandings of sin and salvation, I would like to sketch out a few implications.

The first implication has to do with how we are to understand the evil we perceive in this world. Death and suffering are often viewed as the punishment for, or result of, sin. However, we know that death predated human existence. As we saw in Chapter 4, death seems to be a function of being alive, rather than the result of sin. It is the result of the continuous processes of transformation that all material bodies undergo, a process which seems to be characteristic of created *ousia* as such. Similarly, suffering is a function of being sentient and interdependent, rather than a punishment for sin. Our ecomimetic investigation at least implies that many things that have been traditionally considered evil, or defects in creation, may not be. However, this does not mean that there is no such thing as disorder, or evil, in the world. Genocide, rape, and child abuse should not be accepted as natural functions of being God's creatures. As discussed above, the foundation of created being is God's willing to be for us, and therefore being-for-another is the proper mode of existence for creatures. In this case, sin might be most fruitfully understood as rebellion against this mode of existence by forcing others to be-for-us in ways that violate their own beings. I recognize that there are dangers in this way

of understanding proper existence as "being-for-another": it runs the risk of abuse by those in power against those who have historically been compelled to serve the needs of others.[99] However, all of the material bodies that we examined in Chapter 3 exist in and for themselves while also fulfilling vital functions for others across species lines. Therefore, this model provides grounds for also understanding the failure to recognize ourselves as "those-for-whom-God-is" as another form of sin. Our examination of created *ousia* indicates the importance of balancing "being" for oneself, and the "for-another" of interdependency. Sin is the rejection of this foundation for our being, rejection of our belovedness as a creature of God, rejection of the belovedness of another creature of God, or rejection of our existence as a partaker in the interdependency of created *ousia*.[100]

This means that sin is our rejection of the only ground for our own existence. It amounts to an attempt to un-become what we were created to be. Salvation from sin indicates that the incarnation thwarts our efforts at self-destruction: we can neither cease to be, nor snuff anything else out of existence. The incarnation provides us with being itself, which includes the capacities proper to being-for-others. If sin is the rejection of our being as beloved creatures among and for other beloved creatures of God, then earthly salvation amounts to embracing this given identity. It is the acceptance that we are not self-created, and it is our active participation in the interdependent creation that is

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[99] Such abuse has been tied to the notion that all sin is pride by numerous liberationist critiques.

[100] I am not unaware of the complications such an expansive view of our ethical obligations will necessarily create. A naïve reading of my argument would lead to the conclusion that this means we must stop eating, drinking, and breathing, as each of these activities makes use of another created being without its consent. I am not making any such claims. What I do hope is that a more sophisticated approach to this model enables us to begin to discern what activities are appropriate expressions of the interdependent use that all material bodies make of one another, and what activities are oppressive abuses. This discernment will not be straightforward, which is why I want to save its fuller development for another project.

our home. It is being for others both in being for God (who is for us), and in being for other creatures (who are also for us).

My proposal finds commonality with the tradition by understanding incarnation as absolute gift, and affirming that the incarnation is necessary for every member of creation. It parts ways with the tradition by not using sin as the foundation for that necessity. From my perspective, this rendering safeguards the notion of incarnation as gift more absolutely than does any infralapsarian christology of which I am aware, because the incarnation is no longer treated as necessary to preserve God's honor or fulfill God's plans. It is instead the fulfillment of God's plans in itself. There is no conceivable way to think of the gift of being called into existence as dependent on any merit on the part of the recipient (who did not exist prior to this gift). This is the gift of the incarnation: the gift of creation, the gift of being called into existence by divine love. Nothing exists but through this gift, and everything is equally dependent upon it. It gives no grounds for lording over other created beings in our supposed superiority, and it provides no justification for oppression. This understanding of the incarnation answers the particularity challenges by demonstrating that the universal work of the incarnation is not limited by the particularity of its revelation.

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Conclusion: Bringing Anthropocentric Questions Back Into the Conversation

At the beginning of this work, I suggested that we bracket out strictly human considerations in order to try to gain a fresh perspective on the Christian doctrine of the incarnation. Although I was unable to do this entirely, I have tried to keep the focus away from those strictly human concerns for the majority of this project. As I also noted in the beginning, however, such human concerns are far from unimportant, and the final step in this project is to bring our reconstructed understanding of the two *ousiai* of the incarnation back into conversation with them. In this final chapter, we will look at a persistent challenge to any attempt to separate Christian doctrine from anthropocentrism, as well as at some of the preliminary ethical and theological implications of this proposal.

Why Become Incarnate as a Human Being?

We will begin by addressing the most persistent objection to the approach I have adopted, namely, the presumption that the fact that the Word became incarnate *as a human being* indicates that human beings have a greater value to God than do other creatures.[1] This presumption follows the same logic as did the patriarchal presumption that the fact that the Word became incarnate as a man indicated that men were inherently closer to God. As we discussed in Chapter 3, such an argument is unpersuasive, because it dismisses a multitude of hypostatic properties that the man Jesus possessed and settles

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[1] This presumption is supported by reading Psalm 8:4-8 as supporting anthropocentric assumptions about the dignity of human beings ("a little lower than God," "crowned…with glory and honor," "given…dominion over the works of your hands," and with "all things under their feet"). The author of Hebrews, however, interprets this passage christologically, noting that "As it is, we do not yet see everything in subjection to them, but we do see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone" (Heb 2:8-9). In this section we will examine ways of understanding the Word's incarnation as a human being in ways that do not support anthropocentric assumptions.

on sex as the one property that is theologically significant. While most Christians have come to see the error of this androcentric assumption, they continue to assume that humanity is a more significant hypostatic property than ethnicity, sex, mathematical ability, or sense of humor. One might object at this point that insofar as 'humanity' identifies a nature, it is not properly classed as a hypostatic property. Yet this counter assumes that species are fixed and unchanging – an idea that, as discussed previously, is biologically erroneous. Over time, species change as the environments they inhabit— environments that are composed of other changing material bodies—transform the conditions they must navigate in order to survive. While it is true that a single human being is not going to become some other species during its lifetime, it is entirely possible that under changing environmental pressures our descendants may become something new. In this way, being a member of the species *H. sapiens* is a hypostatic property similar to many others—the unchanging characteristic of a specific individual, but not a characteristic guaranteed to be replicated in that individual's descendants. It is further questionable whether the designation of "human" can be properly defined by the concept of species, since as we have seen, what we perceive as human beings are actually interdependent colonies of many different species that a human body needs in order to function properly. This calls into question simplistic ideas that a human being can be defined simply as a member of the species *H. sapiens*.[2] The "humanity" of Jesus encompassed a multitude of species, all living and dying within the body that his disciples perceived as a single human being.

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[2] Microbiology tells us that a member of *H. sapiens* would cease to function if deprived of all of the other species that share its body.

While I cannot *prove* that Jesus's humanity does not indicate that human beings are the most beloved of all God's creatures, in this section I will examine alternative explanations for why the Word might have become incarnate as a human being, even if human beings are not more valuable to God than other creatures. The existence of a number of other plausible explanations undermines the initial anthropocentric assumption while opening up more avenues for theological reflection.

Divine Condescension

Let us begin this exploration with the option most offensive to anthropocentric sensibilities: that the incarnation suggests humanity is less valuable to God than are other species. This explanation of the humanity of Jesus follows the kenotic logic of Philippians 2: 6-8, which describes Jesus as one

> who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.

Without venturing into debates about the implications this passage might have for divine attributes, or the volumes that have been filled examining the rhetorical and linguistic structure of this hymn, we can find agreement among most interpreters that this passage describes the incarnation as the ultimate divine condescension.[3] According to this passage, in the incarnation the Word gave up its honored status of "equality with God" and took on instead the lowly status of emptiness and slavery—in other words humanity. Not content with that level of humility, the passage goes on to note that even as a human,

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[3] Moessner, David P., "Turning Status 'Upside Down' in Philippi: Christ Jesus' 'Emptying Himself' as Forfeiting Any Acknowledgement of His 'Equality with God' (Phil 2:6-11)," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 31 (2009) 123-143. See also Michael W. Martin & Bryan A. Nash, "Philippians 2:6-11 As Subversive Hymnos: A Study in the Light of Ancient Rhetorical Theory" *The Journal of Theological Studies* ns 66 no 1 Apr 2015, 90-138, among many others.

Jesus was humbled further by the shame of his death by crucifixion. The logic of this passage leaves no room for judging the form of the incarnation—the form of human likeness—as something of great value or importance. Rather, it seems to imply that humanity possesses the lowliest stature. The depth of divine condescension, is demonstrated not just by becoming material, but by becoming particularly *human*.

This logic reverses the anthropocentric assumption that Jesus' humanity indicates the innate superiority of human beings to other members of creation. Instead, it would seem that Jesus' humanity indicates our inferiority—in deciding to "be for another" by becoming incarnate the Word becomes incarnate as the lowliest of material bodies.[4] While the Christian tradition has emphasized the Word's condescension in becoming human, it has held back from equating humanity with the nadir of emptiness and slavery. Instead, many have argued that it was only fitting for the Word to become incarnate as a human being because of our inherent dignity.[5] Such arguments recognize (appropriately) a qualitative divide between the divine and humanity, but then go on to insist on a similar divide between humanity and other creatures. These arguments strain logic, insisting as they do that the Word displayed the power of divinity in weakness, the wisdom of divinity in foolishness, the greatness of divinity in condescension, by becoming the best, wisest, and greatest material creature. Instead, the logic of divine self-emptying implies that in the incarnation, the divine descended to the depths of creation, that in becoming a man the Word emptied itself of divine dignity.

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[4] It might be noted that this logic also reverses the androcentric assumptions that undergirded Christian patriarchy: in becoming a man rather than a woman, Jesus indeed humbled himself by becoming the least of creatures.

[5] For example, see Aquinas' argument that human nature is fit for the incarnation "According to its dignity, because human nature, as being rational and intellectual, was made for attaining to the Word to some extent by its operation, by knowing and loving Him…in the irrational creature the fitness of dignity is wanting." ST III.4.1. For a discussion of human fitness according to need, see below.

There are a number of things of which one might accuse humanity to justify its status as the lowest, rather than the highest, of creatures. We have rejected our interdependence, rebelled against our Creator, imagined ourselves capable of re-creating a better creation than the one we were given. We take pleasure in cruelty towards each other and towards other creatures. We violate the integrity of others by habitually forcing them to do our bidding—whether other humans or other species. The list could go on. These are not the sins of every society, nor are they sins of every individual within a given society, but they do reflect common human impulses towards anthropocentrism and egocentrism that exceed those we find in other species.

Because the major thrust of my project is a critique of anthropocentric assumptions, I find this explanation a helpful counter-balance to the centuries of arguments that human beings must be greater than all other creatures because the Word became incarnate as a human being. It demonstrates that without the anthropocentric presumption that human beings are the greatest creatures to begin with, there is no reason to conclude that the Word's becoming incarnate as a human indicates such greatness. However, resisting anthropocentric biases does not require that one become a self-hating human, viewing ourselves as the worst of the worst, the nadir of creaturely existence. This explanation retains a hierarchy of valuation among creatures that becomes problematic if one begins with the assumption that all of creation—including human beings—is beloved by God. Rather than simply reversing the hierarchy and placing humanity in the lowest place, let us turn to another explanation that focuses on need rather than dignity.

Divine Pedagogy

One explanation of why the Word became incarnate as a human being that does not rely on a hierarchy of created value appeals instead to human need. This explanation has traditionally been tied to infralapsarian christologies that assume that the purpose of the incarnation is to address human sin.[6] According to this logic, human beings could only be freed from our captivity to sin, or only justified from our guilt, through the agency of one who was also a human being. Although such explanations seem incompatible with the understanding of the incarnation that I have developed in the previous chapters, there are ways to view the humanity of the incarnation as a concession to human need even if the work of the incarnation stretches beyond humanity to every member of creation.

I have argued that the primary "work" of the incarnation is to provide the ontological foundation for created being, establishing the "other" for whom God can be. Because the incarnation is the source of created *ousia*, giving it both the stability and the creativity that allows it to evolve into an ever-greater-diversity of beings, it could have accomplished this work by becoming any kind of creature. However, the effects of the incarnation are not limited to establishing the initial conditions of creaturely existence. It continues to provide the stability and the creativity that sustains creation throughout its many transformations. The incarnation provides the matrix for existence as we know it, the pattern by which material bodies interact. Most creatures live and move and have their being within this matrix, blending within the pattern of creation. Having not rebelled

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[6] In addition to his argument that human nature is "fit" for the incarnation by its dignity, Aquinas also argues that it is fit, "According to its need—because it stood in need of restoration, having fallen under original sin." ST III.4.1

against their places in the cosmos, they have no need to repent and they need no remedial lessons in how they should behave. Human beings, however, have denied their place within creation and tried to set ourselves apart from the patterns of transformation that characterize created *ousia*. We have frequently been unwilling or unable to perceive the limits that should constrain our behavior, limits written into our created being itself. Therefore, we need to be corrected, and one way for God to achieve this end is to give us a model tailored to our limited perspectives.

Under this reasoning, one might say that the incarnation provides the pattern of created reality, but that human beings would refuse to conform to the pattern of interdependence unless it was presented in the form of a human being. Subjectively human beings would not perceive, accept, or receive the gifts that the incarnation provides.[7] Objectively, this would not change our being—our existence would still be grounded in the divine decision to be for creation, and it would still be shaped by the interdependent nature of that creation. Subjectively, however, we would continue to refuse to accept our interdependence and remain painfully at odds with the nature of material existence.[8] In this way, we could explain the humanity of the incarnation without either appealing to the greater dignity of human beings or positing humanity as the lowliest of creatures.

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[7] This explanation concurs with Athanasius's pedagogical arguments: "For this cause he was both born and appeared as man, and died, and rose again...that in whatever direction the bias of men might be, from thence he might recall them, and teach them of his own true Father." Hardy, 70.

[8] Unfortunately, in too many instances today human beings continue to deny our interdependence and remain at odds with the nature of material existence, despite the humanity of the incarnation. It is possible, however, that the situation would have been worse without the pattern of Jesus' human life.

Arbitrary

Finally, it is possible that the Word's decision to become incarnate as a human being is entirely arbitrary. The work of the incarnation could have been accomplished through a hypostatic union with any creature, a possibility that Tertullian raises (without endorsing) in his arguments against Marcion: "Suppose that in point of fact he had wanted to be born of a wolf or a ewe or a cow and put on the body of some animal, wild or domestic, to proclaim the kingdom of heaven?"[9] Possessing all of the characteristics that make a body a member of one particular species or another is necessary in order for the Word to become incarnate, participating in the matrix of the material world. However, *which* particular characteristics are taken on could be irrelevant to the intention(s) of the Word in becoming incarnate. Once again, this explanation borrows from and extends the logic of feminist critiques of the patriarchal essentialization of Jesus' maleness. As Johnson argued, sex is a constitutive part of Jesus' identity without reflecting anything about the relative value or need of males in comparison to females.[10] Jesus could not be a generic human, devoid of hypostatic properties, and so he had eye color and sex and hair color. None of these, however, necessarily reflect anything of soteriological significance. Similarly, Jesus could not be a generic creature, of no type and with no characteristics, and so he can be a human without that humanity necessarily reflecting anything of soteriological significance. There is a need for the Word to partake in created *ousia* for anything to exist, but the particular form of created *ousia* that the Word becomes need not tell us anything more about that form.

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[9] Tertullian, "On the Flesh of Christ," in *The Christological Controversy*, 68.
[10] Johnson, 151-152.

This (non)explanation undermines objective anthropocentrism by denying that the particular form of the incarnation indicates anything about God's valuing of similar forms of creatures. As I have noted previously, the tradition has not ascribed a higher worth to humans who possess the same height, eye color, or mathematical abilities as Jesus. This is likely because such characteristics are seen as different capacities within what was assumed to be the overarching, soteriologically significant category of humanity. If the matter is reframed so that no species distinctions are viewed as soteriologically significant, then the species that the Word assumed would become as irrelevant to the efficacy of the incarnation as these other characteristics have long been viewed.[11]

It is unnecessary for human beings to find *the* definitive reason that the incarnation occurred in human form. While each of these alternative explanations appeal to my underlying goal of resisting anthropocentric assumptions, they are not an exhaustive exploration of the possible reasons the Word became incarnate as a human being. What they do is demonstrate that when anthropocentric assumptions that the incarnation demonstrates God's greater esteem for human beings over against other creatures are not given a presumption of correctness, the incarnation itself does not automatically serve as evidence for such a divine preference. Having argued that Jesus' humanity does not necessarily indicate human superiority to other creatures, we will now turn to a related concern: whether denying traditional hierarchies of value somehow strips human life of its dignity.

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[11] If the Word's assumption of humanity were completely arbitrary, then presumably the work of the incarnation would not involve revelation of any necessary knowledge. In line with my earlier description of the ontological (rather than noetic) effects of the incarnation, I will revisit this issue in the section on "Soteriological Considerations" below.

A Decentered Anthropology

It has been objected that conferring greater value to non-human creatures necessarily de-values humanity. Speaking theologically, this objection seems to be that if God loves limestone and Big Bluestem grass as much as humans, then God's love for humanity must be less than we have previously assumed. Stated this way, the flaw in the objection becomes apparent: it assumes that God's love is a finite quantity that must be divided among creatures. It relies on the erroneous assumption that God does not have the capacity to love and cherish every single creature that does, has, or will ever exist to the same extent that God has traditionally been assumed to love and cherish human beings—or at least the elect among us. Examining two human analogies—secondary trauma and parental love—will help us better understand both this objection and the flaw evident within it.

First, human physical and emotional limitations affect the ways that human beings love different groups of people. We can love one another, but we can also become incapacitated—we can "burn out"—when we care too much about too many people. This can be seen in a number of professions that provide treatment for various traumas.[12] To provide effective assistance in such situations, human beings cannot love each traumatized victim they encounter in the same way they might love their own children. Instead they must learn to distance themselves from those they are helping, to create

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[12] Such secondary or vicarious trauma afflicts therapists, social workers, lawyers, and nurses, among others. See Rachel A. Robinson-Keilig, "Secondary Traumatic Stress and Disruptions to Interpersonal Functioning Among Mental Health Therapists," *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, May 2014, 29:8, 1477-1496; Lisa Morgillo, "Do Not Make Their Trauma Your Trauma: Coping with Burnout as a Family Law Attorney," *Family Court Review*, Jul 2015, 53:3, 456-473; Sharon Gil & Michael Weinberg, "Secondary Trauma Among Social Workers Treating Trauma Clients: The Role of Coping Strategies and Internal Resources" *International Social Work*, July 2015, 58:4, 551-561; Michael F. Barnes, Jeffrey L. Todahl, & Aimee Barnes, "Family Secondary Trauma on the Pediatric Critical Care Unit," *Journal of Trauma Practice*, 2002, 1:2, 5-29.

boundaries in order to avoid secondary trauma themselves. The idea of loving not only your own family, or your own nation, or your own race, or your own species, but every member of every species—not to mention all the inanimate creatures as well—loving them with the same concern that a parent loves their child, is overwhelming to the human imagination. And so it is assumed that the divine is similarly incapable of this feat.

This assumption improperly applies a creaturely predication univocally to the divine. Within our world of finitude, all resources have their limits, including our own energy and affection. Therefore, we value things according to their importance to us in this world of scarcity. We prioritize our time, energy, and concern according to the importance we attach to different things. Applied univocally to the divine-world relation, this implies that if the dormouse and the mosquito are God's beloved children, God's love for humanity will be diluted.

The flaw in this assumption can be seen if we consider parental love. Presumably no one believes that upon the birth of a second child, the parents' love for their first child declines by 50% as it gets divided by two. Any parent who claims to love their children equally, but in different ways appropriate to their own unique personalities, needs, and abilities, understands that love is not a zero-sum game. God can love us enough to be willing to become incarnate, suffer, and die in order that we might be, and also love the mosquito enough to be willing to become incarnate, suffer, and die in order that it might be. Hierarchies of value are only necessary if we envision an interventionist God that slays the lion in order to defend the hunter, a God that prefers certain individuals or species to others and acts in light of those preferences. But if we do not assume that God intends human flourishing *at the expense of* other creatures, then there is no need to

imagine that human beings are more important, more valued, or more beloved than any other creature. Avoiding this assumption, however, does not require that we de-value human life.

Disposing of the assumption that divine valuation is hierarchical follows Christianity's egalitarian impulse. It recognizes that human dignity is rooted *not* in the specific capacities or deeds of a particular human being, but rather in the gracious love that God bestows on all human beings. Against distorted justifications of colonial oppression, white supremacy, and patriarchy, this strand of the tradition reminds us all that, in the words of Paul, "while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Ro 5:8). It denies the lie that superior wealth, strength, or power indicates a greater value to the divine. It asserts that one group does not need to bolster its self-esteem by claiming superiority to another, but that each can find its worth in the unfailing love of God. It bases human dignity on God's care for individual human beings and insists that divine care does not wax and wane based on how well an individual manifests some privileged characteristic.

Rooting creaturely dignity in divine esteem affirms each individual's unique relationship to God. What makes these relationships unique is that they are *individual*— that God has a relationship to each being that exists in all of its particularity. It affirms that human beings do have a unique relationship to the divine, but it denies that any other creature lacks a unique relationship to the divine. God's love extends to every creature, but each relationship is unique based upon the infinite variety found in the created cosmos.

The Intrinsic Worth of an Interrelated Creation

By starting with the assumption that our status as beloved creatures of God is a commonality human beings share with other creatures, this approach views the human-world relationship as more similar to kinship than to dominion or stewardship.[13] We are fundamentally related to everything that exists, and our value derives from the same source as does that of everything else. When we consider how we should treat other creatures, we ought to begin from a place of mutuality. This requires recognition that our lives depend on other creatures. This recognition should lead to a sense of gratitude for the benefits we receive. In return, we should not simply take what we require from others while giving nothing back. Instead, we should consider how our existence might benefit other creatures as well as ourselves. As we have noted previously, we cannot stop using other creatures. If we tried, then we would not be able to breathe, let alone eat or drink. Furthermore, any attempt to remove ourselves from the ongoing interdependent processes of transformation would deny our reality as partakers of created *ousia*. The question is not *whether* we will use other creatures, but rather *how* we will use them.

We face similar questions within the realm of human interrelations as well. Unless one withdraws from society entirely, a human being makes use of other human beings. We make use of strangers who raise our food, process it, and deliver it to shops

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[13] Other theologians have found kinship to be a more environmentally-friendly—and accurate—way of understanding the human-world relationship. As Anne M. Clifford notes, "Ecofeminism emphasizes kinship among all humans and with other life forms. Kinship is integral to the elimination of patriarchy in human affairs and…affirms that humans are a part of an interconnected web of life," "An Ecological Theology of Creaturely Kinship," *Journal of Religion & Society*, Supplement Series 3, 2008, 132-145. See also Elizabeth Johnson's critique of stewardship models and support for a kinship model in "Discerning Kinship with Earth," in *Women, Earth, and Creator Spirit* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993) 29-40, and Jame Schaefer, "Acknowledging Kinship and Practicing Companionship" in *Theological Foundations for Environmental Ethics: Reconstructing Patristic and Medieval Concepts* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University, 2009) 149-191.

and restaurants. We make use of merchants who sell it to us. We make use of strangers who purify our water and dispose of our waste. We make use of our friends and loved ones as well—we ask for rides, companionship, and support. Within just and loving relationships, none of these things are necessarily inappropriate. There is a form of mutuality in all of these relationships, whether it is in the mutuality of remuneration for services rendered, or the give-and-take of more intimate relations. It is when this mutuality is denied, when we treat others solely as resources from which we extract those things we need without giving anything in return, that ethical boundaries are crossed. The ethical question is not whether we will make use of other human beings, but how we make use of them—and what we give in return.

Following this model of ethical human relations, we need to develop a similar understanding about what is proper use, what is abuse, and what we owe to other creatures in recognition of what we receive from them. This means that we need to develop an expanded form of *phronesis*, practical wisdom that understands what is appropriate in a given situation. We seem to lack such practical wisdom when it comes to other creatures, as evidenced by the frequent failure of even those whose vocations focus on maintaining appropriate relationships with the natural world. Our attempts at environmental management have led to devastating pest outbreaks, fishery collapses, deforestation, and an extinction rate that is accelerating at an alarming rate. These failures indicate that we are lacking something necessary for phronetic reasoning. According to the arguments advanced throughout this work, what we are lacking is an appropriate hermeneutic for reading the world we inhabit and our place in it. Such a hermeneutic

requires that we give sustained attention to other creatures and the matrix of relationships in which they are embedded.

In order to understand how we are to relate to other creatures, and what uses of them might be appropriate to those relations, we must re-learn how to pay attention to them. Sallie McFague describes this *attention epistemology* as "listening, paying attention to another, the other, in itself, for itself," and taking "with utmost seriousness the differences that separate all beings: the individual, unique site from which each is in itself and for itself."[14] This kind of attention is not something that we must learn *de novo*, however. It is a capacity that human beings exercised in the past, one that we must reacquire. We might find some hints of how to go about re-learning this sustained attention by retracing how it has been erased.

Once upon a time, human beings fed their families by successfully raising their own plants and animals. Success required basic knowledge of the processes by which these other creatures lived—the relations between plants and soil and insects and water, the needs of domestic animals and the diseases that threatened them. Before the time of settled agriculture, human beings fed themselves and those dependent on them by knowledge of undomesticated creatures—which plants were edible and which were poisonous, where animals lived and how to hunt them. For millennia, human survival depended on knowledge about and attention to the quotidian existence of a host of non-human creatures.

The rise of commercial agriculture made such attention seem unnecessary, and has at times actively suppressed it. To take one example, we might look at the

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[14] Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993) 49-50.

relationship of early 21st-century Americans to, say, chicken. While most could identify a

chicken were they to encounter it, the food that we consume on a daily basis seems

wholly disconnected from the animal itself. Plastic-wrapped packages of breasts, thighs,

and wings line the refrigerated sections of groceries across the country. Most are far from

the processing plants where the animals were slaughtered and divided, separating the

parts that demand higher prices from the parts that are less desired. We are largely

unaware of the waste and suffering that goes into American poultry production.

Approximately 3% of chicks delivered to farmers die from congenital defects and other

ailments within the 3-5 weeks that they are given to mature before slaughter.[15] Even after

processing, 20% of the poultry that enters the retail market in the U.S. is lost as waste,

which amount to 4.98 billion pounds of poultry that is killed and offered for sale, but

never consumed.[16] The chickens are bred to grow quickly, reaching "slaughter weight"

when they are 3 to 5 weeks old, and growing over-sized breasts that leave some chickens

unable to stand. Most of their lives are spent in overcrowded sheds without access to

fresh air or sunlight, unable to engage in their hereditary chicken behaviors. While most

Americans express horror or dismay when confronted with film footage of the conditions

under which the chickens live out their days, such reactions do not significantly diminish

the amount of chicken we consume.[17]

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[15] Report from the Center for Food Integrity, quoted by Maryn McKenna, "The Poultry Industry Responds to An Activist Farmer," Wired, February 23, 2015, https://www.wired.com/2015/02/watts-response/, accessed October 8, 2017.

[16] USDA, "Loss-Adjusted Food Availability Documentation," https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-availability-per-capita-data-system/loss-adjusted-food-availability-documentation/, accessed September 17, 2017.

[17] *Food, Inc.,* Participant Media & River Road Entertainment present ; a film by Robert Kenner ; producers, Robert Kenner, Elise Pearlstein ; writers, Robert Kenner, Elise Pearlstein, Kim Roberts ; directed by Robert Kenner. Food, Inc. [Los Angeles, CA] :Magnolia Home Entertainment, 2009. See also Maryn McKenna, "Hoping to Change the Industry, A Factory Farmer Opens His Doors," *Wired*, https://www.wired.com/2014/12/cwif-craigwatts-perdue/, accessed October 8, 2017.

This system of raising animals cannot be interpreted as any kind of creaturely affection or respect for the integrity of the chickens. It is abuse and exploitation. Even further, it reflects a lack of interest in how chickens are evolved to function in their environments. While pastured chickens provide ecosystem services—they aerate and fertilize the soil as they scratch through manure and provide pest control through their consumption of insects, factory farm chickens become part of the ecological burden of the modern American food system. They are fed grain raised in unsustainable monocultures that are dependent on the significant input of nitrogen-based fertilizers and chemical pesticides. This grain is raised on separate farms, transported and processed, before being shipped to the chicken farms, each step in this process incurring a substantial carbon debt. Because of the density of the populations on chicken farms, their waste can create noxious hazards to human and environmental health. The ecosystem services that pastured chickens provide to their fellow creatures are eliminated, new burdens are placed on the ecosystems, and the *telos* of chicken life is circumscribed to merely the production of meat for human consumption or for landfills. The cultural system that provided us with this model of poultry production demonstrates a remarkable lack of understandings of how ecosystems work, an almost willful lack of practical wisdom, and a nearly universal desensitization to any intrinsic worth in the life of the chicken.

This erasure simplifies our moral worlds. We would become practically paralyzed if we consciously weighed every movement we made against every material body impacted by it. This does not mean, however, that we cannot handle greater moral complexity than we currently face. We once had a much greater awareness of how our

actions impacted other creatures. The recognition that humanity once had of its dependence on other creatures, along with the attention that human beings once granted to non-human creatures, was not erased overnight. It involved the development of systems that allowed us to stop paying attention, and vested commercial interests in directing our attention elsewhere. From the perspective of the modern American, whom society has assiduously prevented from practicing sustained attention to other creatures, it seems inconceivable that we might ever reach the lofty goal of treating all creatures as moral objects in their own rights. However, this does not absolve us from making the attempt. We can begin to cultivate habits that take their worth as beloved creatures of God into account, habits that pay attention to the webs of relationship in which they are embedded and in which they play their own unique roles. As Willis Jenkins notes, moral incompetency should not be given the last word. Instead he argues that "ethics can begin from that incompetence… take [that] incompetence as a demand to create new possibilities."[18] In this way, the process of developing ethical attitudes towards other creatures is intimately related and quite similar to the practice of resisting anthropocentric biases that has been the goal of this work. Every failed attempt to rid ourselves of such biases moves us further towards the goal, and every failed attempt to take seriously the ethical demands that other creatures place on us will make us more morally sensitive to such claims.

Soteriological Considerations

Turning from ethical to more strictly theological concerns, I would like to return to the ways that this reconstructed christology opens new avenues for considering

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[18] Willis Jenkins, *The Future of Ethics: Sustainability, Social Justice, and Religious Creativity* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2013) 6.

Christian claims about humanity, sin, and salvation. As noted in Chapter 5, my proposal's emphasis on the already-accomplished objective work of the incarnation seems to undermine the soteriological concerns that have governed the development of many Christian claims. If the "work" of the incarnation is to provide the basis for material existence in both its plurality and its stability, is there any room to still talk about salvation? Or to put the question differently, if the incarnation "works" whether anyone believes it or not, what becomes of the Christian imperative to share the gospel? While responding to these concerns at length is beyond the scope of this project, I would like to offer some preliminary thoughts on trajectories for further reflection.

The Human Predicament

In order to reconstruct an understanding of what salvation might mean, we will first need to deconstruct the portrait of salvation that was developed by sinful men protesting against their condition as created beings.[19] If the Christian doctrine of creation tells us anything, it is that we are not self-made. We are, as Schleiermacher observed, absolutely dependent upon the whence from which we have come.[20] While Schleiermacher claims that this feeling of *absolute* dependence may only relate to the transcendent divine, we also find ourselves partially dependent on the various dimensions of creaturely reality that surround us (as Schleiermacher, too, recognized). This dependence upon not only a divine Creator, but also on "lowly" creatures seems to have been particularly repugnant to Christians writing from societies that valued the relative independence of the affluent. They posited that such dependence was the result of sin and

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[19] In light of the privileged position of those who developed these doctrines in the first place, I use the gendered term here with intention.

[20] Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. by H. R. Mackintosh & J. S. Stewart (London: T & T Clark, 1999) 16.

not part of the Creator's original intention for humanity.[21] The rectification of sin would restore humanity to its privileged position of incorruptibility, removing it from the transforming influence of other material bodies. This idea has developed into common understandings of salvation as an escape *from* the conditions of created being and *to* a condition in which we will be eternally fixed, no longer capable of being moved or influenced by any other creatures, exempt from transformation. This escapism views characteristics that seem inherent in created *ousia*—mutability and interdependence—as evils from which we need to be saved. However, a perspective that assumes the goodness of created *ousia* will see the human predicament differently.

From this perspective, the problem is not the interdependence of created being, but rather an imbalance between the integrity of individual bodies and their dependence on one another. The tension between "being" (or "being for oneself") and "being for another" creates a web of interrelations. This web is distorted by those who refuse to acknowledge their dependence on others while simultaneously violating the integrity of those others. Such creatures take from the matrix of creation more than they return to it, dissipating the energy of other material bodies in activities that do nothing to increase the complexity, capacities, and resilience of the whole. This imbalance can be seen in purely human relationships as people with power direct resources to their own luxuries while people with less power are deprived of the means to support themselves. It also characterizes the relationship of Western civilizations with the natural world, as we transform a vast array of material bodies into artifacts, despoiling creation faster than it

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[21] As we have previously seen, Athanasius argued that humanity was originally set apart from the rest of creation by receiving the additional gifts of incorruption and immortality. Hardy, 58.

can replenish itself.[22] These imbalances warp the matrix of created *ousia*, trading

mutualistic interdependence for systems that oppress one set of material bodies for the

benefit of others.

Because imbalance can be created either by taking too much or by giving too

much, the human predicament may not be subsumable under one description. If sin is

going to be used as a universal signifier for that from which created beings need

salvation, then we need to recognize that it manifests itself in different ways. This is not a

novel suggestion. Andrew Park uses the Korean concept of *han*, "a deep unhealed wound

of a victim that festers in her or him," to distinguish between the experiences of

oppressors and those of victims of oppression.[23] As Park notes, victims of oppression do

not stand in need of forgiveness for their oppression, but rather need liberation and

healing.[24] In contrast, oppressors need judgment, correction, and forgiveness.[25] While

Park recognizes that most people are, in different aspects of their lives, both sinners and

sinned against, his distinction encourages Christians to recover a variety of

understandings of both the human predicament and the effects of the incarnation.[26] In

another approach, Darby Kathleen Ray recommends that we avoid defining sin as

disobedience, willfulness, pride, or self-love in light of the effects such definitions can

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[22] For example, mining extracts oil, coal, and natural gas at a rate that far exceeds the eons they took to accumulate, while the fishing industry cannibalizes itself by practices that lead to fishery collapses.

[23] Andrew Sung Park, *Triune Atonement: Christ's Healing for Sinners, Victims, and the Whole Creation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 39.

[24] Park, 39-45.

[25] Park, 74-90.

[26] By not trying to describe the widely disparate experiences of all human beings under one single rubric, Park makes space for Christians to consider the complex interplay between sin and *han*: "Sin or injustice causes *han*, and *han* produces sin or injustice…unattended or unhealed *han* gives rise to evil. This evil can regenerate hand and sin. Also, sin and *han* collaborate to engender evil. They overlap in many tragic areas of life." Park, 41.

have in cases of domestic violence.[27] While hardening of the heart, betrayal of trust, and "distortion of the self's boundaries" may prove more useful, Ray notes that each needs careful nuancing when applied to the disparately situated perpetrators and survivors of domestic violence.[28]

In light of the Christological understanding proposed here, sin might profitably be thought of as an imbalance or distortion of the relationship between "being" and "being for another" that characterizes created *ousia*. This can manifest in a failure to authentically be the creature that one is made to be, the failure to receive from others what they have to provide. It can also manifest in a failure to be for another, to give to others and thus fulfill one's role within one's creaturely society. From this understanding we can describe the human predicament characterized by sin as that distortion of created being that disregards the proper bounds of interdependence by either taking or giving more than is appropriate.

Salvation

If this imbalance between integrity and interdependence describes the thing from which creation needs saving, then salvation could be fruitfully understood as the restoration of balance. Because of the distortions that have characterized much of human history, such a restoration will require a series of reversals in which the downtrodden are lifted up and the elevated are brought low. However, a restoration of balance will not simply invert the distorted power dynamics that exist, turning the oppressed into

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[27] Darby Kathleen Ray, *Deceiving the Devil: Atonement, Abuse, and Ransom*, (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1998) 31.
[28] Ray, 31-32.

oppressors and oppressors into oppressed. Rather it will re-write the relationships so that all become fellow citizens, fellow creatures in this interdependent world.

We have no reason to believe that such a restoration will be magically imposed from outside of the created order. It does not seem possible without creaturely involvement. Within the merely human realm, it would require repentance and the relinquishment of privilege and power on the part of those who have benefited from the distortion. This shift in power is necessary to heal those who have suffered from the imbalance and restore them to positions of integrity and responsibility within the moral order. Beyond the merely human, such restoration would require a recognition that human flourishing depends on the flourishing of a multitude of other creatures. This recognition would need to be accompanied by concerted action to contract human expansion in order to make room for such creaturely flourishing. If human beings do not take such action, it is entirely possible that balance will be restored through the decimation of humanity as we create conditions ever-more-threatening to human life. The depletion of potable water, the loss of fertile topsoil, the fouling of the air, and the eradication of numerous ecosystems that provide unquantifiable services to living creatures, all threaten human flourishing. While it is unlikely that human beings will actually go extinct, changing conditions are likely to lead to a substantial reduction in human population, and harsher conditions for the remaining human beings. Such an impact on humanity might restore human beings to the ecological balance. If so, this restoration of balance will have been carried out with creaturely involvement—whether the creatures involved are human beings, diseases, or irradiated particles. Human beings have a choice: we can bring ourselves into alignment with the balance of creaturely

ousia, or we can be brought into alignment by forces beyond our control. The latter will inevitably be the more painful.

The necessity of creaturely involvement in order for such salvation to occur may seem to jeopardize one fundamental Christian commitment. Some will no doubt argue that it makes Christ superfluous. The previous chapters of this work have attempted to demonstrate that the incarnation is the ground of all existence, and as such it can never be superfluous. The incarnation established the pattern of integrity and interdependence that characterizes all material existence, the pattern that has been distorted and that will be restored. That Christ's work is carried out through created beings in no way undermines the necessity of Christ for existence or for salvation. Numerous examples in scripture demonstrate that God acts in the world through the cooperation of creatures. In Exodus, God did not orchestrate the escape of the Hebrew people by magically teleporting them away from Egypt. Instead, their release was procured with the cooperation of frogs and gnats, locusts and mysterious diseases. In Luke, the Word did not become incarnate by making for itself a human body *ex nihilo*, but by growing within Mary's womb after she had given her consent saying, "Let it be with me according to your word" (Lk 1:38). In Acts, God did not restore the political balance by killing kings and granting wealth to paupers, but Christian communities enacted this restoration by selling their accumulated possessions and holding all things in common (Acts 2:44-45). In none of these cases does creaturely involvement make the divine will superfluous.

In line with process theology, this approach understands divine involvement to consist more of inviting creatures to exist within the balance of created *ousia*, rather than the imposition of balance by divine *fiat*. Because God does not control the creature's

response to the divine invitation, there is always a risk of creaturely wandering that distorts the web of created *ousia*.[29] Regardless of their particular understandings of atonement, the vast majority of Christians recognize that whatever was accomplished in the incarnation, it did not make the world right in any immediate, intra-historical sense. Evil, sin, and oppression continue. Because of this, millions of Christians living with oppression understand salvation to be a process that requires creaturely cooperation. God opens up a new way, but it is the responsibility of creatures to follow that way.[30] In her review of womanist theological approaches to salvation, Monica Coleman cites four common characteristics: "(1) God's presentation of unforeseen possibilities; (2) human agency; (3) the goal of justice, survival, and quality of life; and (4) a challenge to the existing order."[31] Rather than deferring hope for reconciliation to the *eschaton* and a new reality discontinuous with the one in which we find ourselves now, my approach follows womanist and other liberation theologies in seeking creaturely agency to join the divine restoration already at work in the world.

Such an approach to salvation can only understand individual salvation in the context of communal salvation. Individual human beings are not saved out from the creation, but experience salvation in the healing of creation. An individual decision to

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[29] While process theology's conception of the divine indicates that God cannot control these creaturely decisions, we need not delve into distinctions between whether God can control but chooses not to, or cannot control creaturely decisions. Rather, I want to note that process theologians concur with this representation of divine action and the risks involved: "God seeks to persuade each occasion toward that possibility for its own existence which would be best for it; but God cannot control the finite occasion's self-actualization. Accordingly, the divine creative activity involves risk." John B. Cobb, Jr. & David Ray Griffin, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1976) 53.

[30] Delores Williams describes the faith of black female Christians in the belief "that God was involved in their history, that God helped them make a way out of no way." *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2006) ix.

[31] Monica A. Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way: a womanist theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008) 33.

live in alignment with the individual integrity and communal interdependence of created *ousia* does not earn one a spot in heaven, but rather begins the re-creation of what God deemed "good" about the beginning, what was good before human beings had begun distorting the matrix of created *ousia*. This approach understands salvation to involve the healing of creation as something that occurs in this world, that offers restoration to the community through individual action and to individuals through the healing of the community, and that will be experienced differently by people who are situated differently within the distortion—the oppressed will be lifted up while the oppressors are brought low.

Conclusion

In this work, we have explored how anthropocentric assumptions about the work of the incarnation and the two natures involved in it have shaped the development of conciliar christology. They have contributed to the coherence and plausibility challenges that have been raised against the doctrine of the incarnation, and they have bolstered interpretations of the doctrine that support environmentally irresponsible attitudes and actions. In order to determine whether such assumptions are separable from Christian claims about the incarnation, this project began with the assumption that all creatures are beloved by God, and that whatever the incarnation accomplishes affects all of creation. By keeping the focus on creatures that are other-than-human, we were able to talk about the two *ousiai*, rather than the two natures, of the incarnation. In conversation with a number of other created bodies, we have seen that created *ousia* seems to be characterized by an interdependence that necessarily includes transformation as the primary mode of creaturely interaction. Applying these insights to our understanding of

the work of the incarnation, we found helpful resources in the supralapsarian christology of Karl Barth. With Barth, I argued that despite its appearance in the midst of time and space, the incarnation—or the decision to become incarnate—is the basis for everything that exists. Against Barth, I would deny that everything that exists is merely the theater of human salvation, instead affirming rather that the incarnation includes all of creation in its creative and redemptive work.

Despite the fact that this theological reconstruction was undertaken by excluding purely human concerns from the beginning, this final chapter has shown that its results are not irrelevant to human concerns. The insights that we gained from our ecomimetic interpretation of the doctrine provide grounds for re-engaging a variety of human concerns as well. Although it is beyond the scope of this work to develop these implications thoroughly, this reconstructed understanding of the incarnation as the source, ground, and pattern of created *ousia* opens up new avenues for considering sin, salvation, and human responsibility.

The incarnation is the created expression of the divine decision to be for another, a decision that draws that other into existence. As such, it grounds the existence and integrity of the other as the one for whom God is. It also provides the shape of existence, such that the other is itself "for another" as well. Doubling and redoubling, this "being for another" offers a theological explanation for the diversity that characterizes creation. Created *ousia* is (1) being, (2) with others, (3) in a way that contributes to the existence of those others. We are incapable of extricating ourselves from the web of interrelations that govern our existence. This rendition of created *ousia* provides a theological basis for an ethics that understands the self only in relation to other selves, as both loving and

beloved. This portrait is one that we can reject only by rejecting the grounds for our

existence, the balance of interdependence that can only be disturbed at our own peril.

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