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# Immaterialist, Materialist, and Substance Dualist accounts of Incarnation

**Summary:** Hight and Bohannon have recently argued that an immaterialist ontology is more consonant with the doctrine of the Incarnation. I argue that their proposal is insufficiently motivated, as their objections to a substance dualist account of the incarnation are not compelling. I defend a concrete-parts Christology, which allows for materiality and immateriality to be exemplified by Christ in two different respects. I show how immaterialist and materialist objections that dualism cannot adequately account for the unity of the incarnate Christ can be overcome.

**Zusammenfassung:** Hight und Bohannon haben kürzlich die Auffassung vertreten, dass eine immaterialistische Ontologie mehr mit der Lehre von der Inkarnation Gottes übereinstimmt als eine materialistische Ontologie. Ich behaupte, dass ihr Vorschlag insofern nicht ausreichend begründet ist, als ihre Einwände gegen eine substanzdualistische Auffassung der Inkarnation nicht überzeugend sind. Ich verteidige eine Christologie konkreter Aspekte, welche in zweierlei Hinsicht durch Christus sowohl Materialität als auch Immaterialität exemplifiziert sieht. Ich zeige, wie der immaterialistische und der materialistische Einwand, dass der Dualismus der Einheit des menschengewordenen Christus nicht ausreichend Rechnung trägt, überwunden werden kann.

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## I Introduction

In recent years, a number of theologians and philosophers of religion have argued that considerations based on the doctrine of the incarnation provide good reasons for thinking that a Christian ought to reject substance dualism, the view that the mind is a non-physical entity distinct from the physical body. For example, in a recent article Marc Hight and Joshua Bohannon argue that an immaterialist ontology – a metaphysic that denies the existence of material substance – is more consonant with Christian dogma, in particular the doctrine of the Incarnation of Christ. They note that there is a distinct problem raised by the sup-

position that Christ in his human nature had a material body while in his divine aspect was wholly immaterial. They discuss various possible solutions, such as Eleonore Stump's reduplicative strategy, and offer several objections to these solutions. Utilizing the philosophy of the famous eighteenth-century Irish immaterialist George Berkeley, they argue that an immaterialist reading of the Incarnation avoids the problem. They state that the goal of their paper 'is to make plausible the claim that, from the analysis of this one example, there are strong reasons for thinking that if one wants to be a Christian one ought to be an immaterialist.'<sup>1</sup> In another article, materialist Trenton Merricks argues that a mind-dualist understanding cannot provide an adequate account of the way in which only the body of Jesus belongs to the Logos. He proposes a model which denies that humans have souls, and claims that at the incarnation the Logos becomes a purely physical body.<sup>2</sup>

In this paper, I shall argue that immaterialist's and materialist's objections to a substance dualist account of the incarnation are not compelling. I shall first reply to the objections by the immaterialists, followed by the materialists. I shall end by showing how a model of the incarnation which is proposed in a recent paper published in *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* can be utilized to provide a better mind-dualist account of the way in which only the body of Jesus belongs to the Logos.

## II Reply to objections

As I see it, the problem with Hight and Bohannon's proposal is that it is insufficiently motivated. While their appeal for a theologically and philosophically coherent account of the incarnation is commendable, I do not think that such an account requires immaterialism.

Consider first their objections to the reduplicative strategy. They note that Stump invokes scholastic ontologies which use the concepts of prime matter and substantial form and that she argues that incompatible attributes could be 'segregated' from one another by virtue of the fact that they inhere in different natures. They object that the coherence of the reduplicative strategy depends (at least in the case of Stump) on one's acceptance of an Aquinian view of meta-

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1 Marc HIGHT/Joshua BOHANNON, "The Son More Visible: Immaterialism and the Incarnation," in *Modern Theology* 26 (2010), 120–148.

2 Trenton MERRICKS, "The Word Made Flesh: Dualism, Physicalism and the Incarnation", in *Persons: Human and Divine*, edited by Peter VAN INWAGEN and Dean W. ZIMMERMAN (Oxford/New York: Clarendon Press, 2007).

physics and composition, especially the concepts of substantial form and *materia prima*, which are mostly alien to audiences today.<sup>3</sup> An immediate reaction is that their immaterialist metaphysics, according to which ‘the commonsense objects we perceive (e.g., chairs, tables, and stones) are in fact collections of well-ordered sensory ideas’<sup>4</sup>, is also mostly alien to audiences today. More substantially, philosophical theologians such as Richard Cross have pointed out that one could think of contradictory properties (e.g. immateriality, materiality) as being exemplified by Christ in two different respects (in respect of his divine nature, and in respect of his human nature) in a relatively straightforward way, by understanding the two natures as distinct and concrete parts of the incarnate divine person.<sup>5</sup>

Oliver Crisp explains that in the literature, this is called the concrete-nature view, according to which ‘nature’ is fundamentally a concrete particular. On this view, Christ’s human nature was fundamentally a concrete particular (note that this view does not deny that this concrete particular had certain human properties). By contrast, the abstract-nature view understands ‘nature’ to be fundamentally a property or a set of properties. On this view, Christ’s human nature was fundamentally a property, or set of properties, necessary and sufficient for being human (this view does not deny that Christ had a corporeal body, or that Jesus of Nazareth was a concrete particular).<sup>6</sup> It is probable that Aristotle and almost everyone else up to the fifth century AD (including those who stated the formulae of Chalcedon) understood the natures of Christ to be universals and not concrete particulars,<sup>7</sup> and that the idea of human nature as a concrete particular originates in the sixth century from Leontius of Byzantium, who subsequently influenced John of Damascus, and through John the medieval theologians and the Protestant scholastics.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, as noted above, the con-

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3 Ibid, 126.

4 Ibid, 129.

5 Richard CROSS, “Parts and properties in Christology,” in M.W.F. STONE (ed.), *Reason, Faith and History: Philosophical Essays for Paul Helm* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 177–178.

6 Oliver CRISP, *Divinity and Humanity: The Incarnation Reconsidered* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 41, 46, 68.

7 Richard SWINBURNE, *The Christian God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 211.

8 Richard CROSS, “Individual Natures in the Christology of Leontius of Byzantium,” in *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 10 (2002), 245, 264–265. Cross argues that in his earlier work *Contra Eutychianos et Nestorianos* Leontius teaches that Christ’s human nature is a universal. However, in his late work the *Epilyseis* Leontius affirms that Christ’s human nature is an individual, and argues that such a nature fails to be a subsistent on the grounds that it exists in the person of the Word, even though (as shown by recent studies) he does not use the term *enhu-postatos* to talk about his theory of the nature’s non-subsistence. Cross argues that it is not clear precisely what motivates Leontius to change his position (ibid, 250). For the medieval

crete-nature view does not deny that the particulars have properties that belong to their kinds. Rather, it is consistent with the affirmation that the human concrete particular had human properties while the divine concrete particular had divine properties, and this retains the idea which the framers of Chalcedon had in mind, viz. Christ had two essences, human and divine.

A concrete-parts Christology would agree with John of Damascus' statement concerning the Logos post-incarnation that 'The whole 'he', then, is perfect God, but not wholly God, because he is not only God but also man. Likewise, the whole 'he' is perfect man, but not wholly man, because he is not only man but also God.'<sup>9</sup> This runs contrary to John Webster's interpretation of Chalcedon's 'without division, without separation': 'That is to say, to talk of divinity and humanity is not to distinguish separate aspects of Christ, as if he were part human and part divine, and as if his properties were divisible between divinity and humanity. Jesus Christ is in his entirety divine and in his entirety human.'<sup>10</sup> To Webster's interpretation it can be replied that in the historical context of the council, the phrase 'without division, without separation' was used to exclude Nestorianism; the difference of the terms 'division' and 'separation' reflected the difference in the commonality of terminology used by the Alexandrian Cyril and the Antiochenes to this effect.<sup>11</sup> There is insufficient justification, therefore, for interpreting these Chalcedonian adverbs as excluding concrete-parts Christology together with Nestorianism.

On the other hand, there is a good reason for preferring the concrete-rather than abstract-nature view, namely that the concrete-nature view allows for contradictory properties to be exemplified by Christ in two different respects: in respect of his divine nature (or *qua* God), and in respect of his human nature (or *qua* man). Consider this analogy suggested by Cross: there is nothing contradictory in the thought that a lollipop is both red and not-red: not-red in respect of its stick, and red in respect of its edible top; in this instance, the stick and the edible top are two distinct and concrete parts of the lollipop.<sup>12</sup> Just as there is nothing implausible about a thing (e.g. lollipop) having two concrete parts (stick, edible top) with distinct properties (non-red, red), there is nothing implausible about a person (e.g. Christ) having two concrete parts (human, divine)

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views of Christ's human nature, see Richard CROSS, *The Metaphysics of the Incarnation: Thomas Aquinas to Duns Scotus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>9</sup> JOHN OF DAMASCUS, *De fide Orthodoxa*, 3.1–2, 7. Translation taken from David FORD and Mike HIGTON, *Jesus* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 128–129.

<sup>10</sup> JOHN WEBSTER, "Incarnation," in *The Blackwell Companion to Modern Theology*, edited by Gareth JONES (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 224.

<sup>11</sup> R.V. SELLERS, *The Council of Chalcedon* (London: SPCK, 1953), 214–215.

<sup>12</sup> CROSS (see above, n. 5), 177–178.

with distinct properties (materiality, immateriality). What I have just shown is that, to affirm that contradictory properties were exemplified by Christ in two different respects, one can make use of analogies based on familiar objects such as a lollipop, without invoking the obscure Aquinian view of metaphysics and composition.

Hight and Bohannon object that the admission that one of the natures of the Son had a material component engenders the difficulty that it would imply that a part of God was or included an inactive substance, contrary to the orthodox understanding of God as an eminently active agent. They also ask, 'If Christ the Son had a body and bodies are material, then how can the Son be one with God the Father, an immaterial being?'<sup>13</sup> In reply, it can be argued that the person of the Son had a material component *but he had it in respect of his human nature*, not in respect of his divine nature. Thus, it is not the case that the material component was a part of God; rather, it was a part of man, which in turn was a part distinct from the Son's divine part (cf. the lollipop, where the stick and the top are distinct parts) which was united with God the Father.

It might be asked, 'if the Son's divine part was united with God the Father as well as the Holy Spirit, and the Son's divine part was united with the human part, then does this not entail that God the Father and the Holy Spirit were also united with the human part, hence entailing the incarnation of all three divine persons?'<sup>14</sup> Likewise, Muslim apologist Abu 'Isa objects that that the limitations resulting from the incarnation which affect one of the hypostases of the eternal would also apply to the other two hypostases because of their congruence in being one substance.<sup>15</sup> To this issue Cross replies it can be supposed that (*sans* the incarnation) each person is a sphere of consciousness of one divine substance. On this view, the substance is not a part of the person; rather, a part of the substance constitutes a person.<sup>16</sup> With this insight, it can be postulated that, at the incarnation, part of the divine substance became a concrete part of Christ, and this part exemplified all the essential divine properties, thus this part would constitute a complete divine nature of Christ. Since only a part of the divine substance was involved, this would not entail the incarnation of all three divine persons. For the relationship between the persons of the Trinity, one can then affirm what Crisp labels the Weak Person-Perichoresis Thesis: the persons

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**13** HIGHT/BOHANNON (see above, n. 1), 127, 141.

**14** This question is posed in CROSS (see above, n. 5), 190.

**15** David THOMAS (ed.), *Early Muslim polemic against Christianity: Abu 'Isa al-Warraq's 'Against the Incarnation'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 127.

**16** Richard CROSS, "Incarnation," in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology*, edited by Thomas FLINT and Michael C. REA (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 461.

of the Trinity share all their properties in a common divine essence apart from those properties which serve to individuate each person of the Trinity, or express a relation between only two persons of the Trinity.<sup>17</sup> Using this thesis, it can be postulated that the property of being united to the human part, and the properties which resulted from this union (e.g. the property of having a material body), were some of the properties which belonged only to the Logos. Such properties were not shared by other divine persons, while other properties, including those which are essential to the divine nature such as omniscience, omnipotence, omnipresence, etc., were shared.

Hight and Bohannon also mention the familiar mind-body problem. They write, ‘There is a long tradition going back before Descartes that seriously questions our ability to understand how these components of human nature are related. How is an immaterial mind related to a material body *within* human nature?’<sup>18</sup> They go on to assert that we simply do not understand that relation, ‘which is precisely why Christians seriously ought to consider immaterialism.’<sup>19</sup> Our lack of understanding of a relation, however, is not a good reason to reject the existence of the relation. As Bealer and Koons point out, physics itself admits lawful relationships among physical entities that are extraordinarily diverse in nature and, in turn, admits relations of causal influence and law-grounded explanation among these entities. Physics allows, moreover, that some of these lawful relationships are brute facts having no further explanations. Likewise, the relationship between mind and body could well be a brute fact having no further explanation.<sup>20</sup>

Finally, Hight and Bohannon argue that ‘even if one accepted that an immaterial substance could have a material nature, then one must motivate the claim that such a being is nonetheless a unity.’<sup>21</sup> The problem which Hight and Bohannon mention here is one which besets the projects of a number of Christologists. Crisp, for example, has suggested that the two natures of Christ somehow interpenetrate to form one united person, yet without confusion or commingling of natures; this is the doctrine of perichoresis, which Crisp qualifies as *nature* perichoresis to distinguish it from person perichoresis which concerns the Trinity.<sup>22</sup> Crisp proposes that nature perichoresis involves an asymmetri-

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17 CRISP (see above, n. 6), 31–32. Crisp notes that on this version of person-perichoresis the interpenetration of each of the persons of the Trinity by others is limited, but he argues that this is required in order to avoid jeopardizing the individuation of the persons of the Trinity.

18 HIGHT/BOHANNON (see above, n. 1), 127.

19 Ibid, 144.

20 George BEALER/Robert KOONS, *The Waning of Materialism* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), xviii.

21 HIGHT/BOHANNON (see above, n. 1), 124.

cal relation between the two natures. The divine nature penetrates his human nature without involving the transfer of properties from the divine to the human nature, but the human nature does not penetrate the divine nature. Crisp suggests that, just as the divine nature might be said to interpenetrate the whole of creation, sustaining it and upholding it at each moment of its continued existence, so also the divine nature of Christ interpenetrates the human nature, upholding and sustaining it in existence. While this implies that these two instances of divine interpenetration are qualitatively the same,<sup>23</sup> there is nevertheless a significant degree of difference. God could act upon other human beings in the way he acts upon Christ, but Christ's consciousness of the penetrative presence of God would appear to have been significantly greater than most human beings, and this was also shown by God's enablement of him to do miracles.<sup>24</sup> However, the degree to which a human nature has to be penetrated by the divine nature so as to make them one person would seem to be arbitrary on Crisp's view.

Some theologians and philosophers have gone the opposite direction from Hight and Bohannon by embracing a *materialist* (rather than immaterialist) model of the incarnation in order to account for the unity of the person. For example, Trenton Merricks proposes a model which denies that humans have souls, and claims that at the incarnation the Logos becomes a purely physical body.<sup>25</sup> Merricks argues that a mind-dualist understanding cannot provide an adequate account of the way in which only the body of Jesus belongs to the Logos. He notes that dualists typically assert that the union of soul and body is partly constituted by the soul's having direct control over the body, and by the body influencing the soul.<sup>26</sup> Merricks objects that this is inadequate, arguing that other divine persons (the Father and the Spirit), being omnipotent, also have direct control over each and every body, and they also could be influenced by these bodies in virtue of having direct and immediate knowledge of everything in and around every body, and having the ability to have their experiences. But surely it does not follow that each person of the Trinity has each and every body.<sup>27</sup> The dualist might reply that while the Father and the Spirit have direct control of each human body, they do not exercise such control. This re-

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<sup>22</sup> CRISP (see above, n. 6), 1–3.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 19–20.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>25</sup> Trenton MERRICKS, "The Word Made Flesh: Dualism, Physicalism and the Incarnation," in *Persons: Human and Divine*, edited by Peter VAN INWAGEN and Dean W. ZIMMERMAN (Oxford/New York: Clarendon Press, 2007).

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 281–283.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 284–285.

ply, however, would make embodiment a matter of a soul's exercising control over a body, which implies that whenever one is not intending bodily actions, one is not embodied. But that implication cannot be right, for one's failing to intend bodily action does not render one totally disembodied.<sup>28</sup>

Nevertheless, the problem with a physicalist account of the incarnation is that, if the Logos becomes a purely physical entity at the incarnation, then it would seem to be metaphysically impossible for him to possess divine properties such as having the knowledge of all truths, having the power of omnipotence, etc, as there seems to be a metaphysical limit as to how much information and power a physical body can hold.<sup>29</sup> Such a limitation would entail Ontological Kenoticism, according to which the Logos gave up certain divine properties at the incarnation, a highly problematic proposal as has been pointed out by many.<sup>30</sup>

A substance dualist can reply that a physicalist account of the incarnation is insufficiently motivated. To begin, it should be noted that John 1:14 does not imply that the Word became a purely material entity. First, *sarx* (usually translated as 'flesh') does not necessarily imply a purely physical entity; rather, as in the preceding verse (v.13), *sarx* represents human nature as distinct from God;<sup>31</sup> *sarx* stands for the whole man,<sup>32</sup> and it is (at least) arguable that for the biblical authors the whole man is a dualistic (and not purely materialistic) entity.<sup>33</sup> Second, as the eminent New Testament scholar C.K. Barrett observes, it is difficult

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**28** Ibid. See also Thomas SENOR, "The Compositional Account of the Incarnation," in *Faith and Philosophy* 24 (2007), 52, 58–59, who argues that having a body that allowed the Logos to express himself is insufficient for the body being a part of him. Merricks also argues that, given dualism, having a human body seems to be neither necessary nor sufficient for being human. But he would prefer an account of the Incarnation according to which the Son's coming to have a human body is at least a necessary condition for his becoming human (MERRICKS (see above, n. 25), 292–293). This, however, is merely an assertion of personal preference.

**29** Richard STURCH, *The Word and the Christ* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 26.

**30** See, for example, William Lane CRAIG and J. MORELAND, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 607–608.

**31** C.K. BARRETT, *The Gospel according to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978), 164.

**32** Raymond BROWN, *The Gospel according to John*, vol. 1 (Garden City/New York: Doubleday, 1966), 13.

**33** See John W. COOPER, *Body, Soul and Life Everlasting: Biblical Anthropology and the Monism-dualism Debate* (Leicester: Apollon, 2001); John W. COOPER, "Exaggerated Rumors of Dualism's Demise," in *Philosophia Christi* 11(2009), 453–464. cf. Joel B. GREEN, *Body, Soul, and Human Life: The Nature of Humanity in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008). Cooper points out that this position does not necessarily entail the sundering of the unity of human life, a sundering which would result in evils such as the neglect of the material dimensions of human existence. For a philosophical theological critique of Christian materialism, see Charles



to determine precisely the meaning of *egeneto*, the word which is often translated as ‘became’. Barrett suggests that *egeneto* is used in the same sense as in v.6: the Word came on the (human) scene – as flesh, man.<sup>34</sup> This is consistent with the traditional view which assumed that ‘became’ ought to be interpreted as ‘manifested in’, ‘present in’, or ‘took on’ flesh (cf. John 4:2 ‘Christ has come in the flesh’; see also 2 John 7, 1 Tim 3:16),<sup>35</sup> rather than ‘turned into’ flesh.

In addition, it is significant to note that a number of eminent philosophers have recently announced ‘the waning of materialism’, arguing that issues such as the mind-body problem (which immaterialists such as Hight and Bohannon also raise) are insufficient justification for rejecting various forms of anti-materialism such as property dualism and substance dualism.<sup>36</sup>

But what about the specific problem which Merricks (as well as Hight and Bohannon) mentions? Is it really the case that the unity of the incarnate Christ cannot be accounted for if we assume dualism? Not so. For one can postulate that the human part is integrated with the divine part in a way that is consistent with the Divine Preconscious Model which is proposed in a recent paper published in *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie*.<sup>37</sup> According to this model, at the Incarnation a distinct aspect of the consciousness of the Logos acquired newly created human properties, such as the capacity to experience physical pain, and that the Logos retained his divinity in virtue of another distinct aspect of his consciousness having access to divine properties which resided in his divine preconscious. (Note that a single consciousness can have aspects which are distinct but not separate from one another: for example, my visual experience of the computer screen is distinct from my conscious access to my fingers typing the keyboard, but both are aspects of my single unified consciousness at a particular moment). It can be postulated that the human properties would also include a certain extent of the consciousness’s ability to function during his embodied stage being made dependent on a particular brain, and that this dependence would account for the particular brain and body being his. Such dependence was not the case for God the Father and the Holy Spirit, and therefore it is not the case that the Father and Spirit were incarnated.

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TALIAFERRO and Stewart GOETZ, “The Prospect of Christian Materialism,” *Christian Scholars Review* 37 (2008), 303.

**34** BARRETT (see above, n. 31), 165.

**35** RICHARD MULLER, “Incarnation, Immutability, and the Case for Classical Theism,” in *Westminster Theological Journal* 45 (1983), 35.

**36** BEALER/KOONS (see above, n. 20).

**37** ANDREW LOKE, “On the Coherence of the Incarnation: The Divine Preconscious Model,” in *NZSTh* 51(2009), 50–63.

### III Conclusion

In conclusion, both immaterialist and materialist objections to a substance dualist account of the incarnation are not compelling. While a Christian might have other reasons for wanting to reject substance dualism, considerations based on the doctrine of the incarnation have not been shown to provide a good reason for this rejection.