

# THE SON MORE VISIBLE: IMMATERIALISM AND THE INCARNATION

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Christians typically believe in both the reasonableness of their religion and in the necessity of an ineliminable element of faith, perhaps best captured by belief in the Christian mysteries. Reconciling the demands of reason with those of faith, however, has long generated skeptical challenges. Far from being an inspiration, the mysteries are occasionally charged with hiding outright contradictions, and hence are entirely contrary to reason. In this article we argue that an immaterialist ontology—a metaphysic that denies the existence of material substance—is more consonant with Christian dogma than any ontology that includes the existence of material substance. To aid us in this endeavor, we use the philosophy of the famous eighteenth-century Irish immaterialist (and later Anglican bishop) George Berkeley as a guide while engaging one particularly difficult Christian mystery: the doctrine of the Incarnation of Christ. The goal 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.

As a believer in both the truth and implicit reasonableness of the Christian religion, Berkeley argued that the practice of speculative philosophy should be concerned with the promotion of Christian virtue and its attendant doctrines. In an oft-cited passage in his *Principles*, Berkeley reminds the reader:

For, after all, what deserves the first place in our studies, is the consideration of *God*, and our *duty*, which to promote, as it was the main drift and design of my labours, so shall I esteem them altogether useless and ineffectual, if by what I have said I cannot inspire my readers with a

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pious sense of the presence of God: and having shewn the falseness or vanity of those barren speculations, which make the chief employment of learned men, the better dispose them to reverence and embrace the salutary truths of the Gospel, which to know and to practice is the highest perfection of human nature.<sup>1</sup>

Although it is routine to nod in the direction of Berkeley's religious commitments, less attention has been given to whether his metaphysical claims *actually do* show the falseness of atheistic speculations and promote the Christian religion.<sup>2</sup> Rather than construct a new ontological system, here we adopt Berkeley's system and contend that there are good reasons for supposing that immaterialism is more conducive to "the salutary truths of the Gospel" than its materialist rivals.<sup>3</sup> Note that it is not our intention to offer an independent assessment of Berkeley's system. Instead, we here explore how a principled treatment of ontology might strengthen the plausibility of *Christian* claims. The present article constitutes the *start* of this project by focusing on the doctrine of the Incarnation. Although we hold that our basic conclusions apply to immaterialist ontologies in general, we here restrict ourselves in the interest of expository clarity to the narrower claim that Berkeley's immaterialist metaphysic, suitably interpreted, makes the doctrine more amenable to reason without removing its status as a genuine Christian mystery.

Berkeley is explicitly concerned with defending an interpretation of the Christian mysteries that renders them both conformable to reason (i.e., they do not entail explicit contradictions) and appropriately mysterious, such that awe and faith are inspired by their recounting. As Crito, one of Berkeley's mouthpieces, says in *Alciphron*: "That, indeed, which evidently contradicts sense and reason you have a right to disbelieve."<sup>4</sup> In the introduction to the *Three Dialogues* he nonetheless reminds the reader of his apologetic goal and of the fruits generated by a "close and methodical application of thought," from which arises "the manifest notion of God, and the comfortable expectation of immortality."<sup>5</sup> Berkeley is equally concerned, however, with preserving those elements of mystery without which Christian *faith* loses its meaning. In the *Alciphron* he notes that

The being of a God is capable of clear proof, and a proper object of human reason: whereas the mysteries of His nature, and indeed whatever there is of mystery in religion, to endeavour to explain and prove by reason is a vain attempt. *It is sufficient if we can shew there is nothing absurd or repugnant in our belief of those points*, and, instead of framing hypotheses to explain them, we use our reason only for answering the objections brought against them.<sup>6</sup>

According to Berkeley the mysteries of the Christian faith—and by extension the doctrine of the Incarnation—are not and cannot be demonstrably absurd (i.e., they are not contrary to reason). Here we present a Berkeleyian explica-

tion of the Incarnation which preserves both of these aspects. Berkeley's immaterialism, we argue, provides a subtle interpretation of the Incarnation that is more amenable to the dictates of reason than comparable materialist understandings while better preserving the requirements of faith.

### *The Doctrine of the Incarnation of Christ*

The orthodox understanding of the Incarnation was formulated definitively by the Council of Chalcedon (C.E. 451), which proclaimed:

Wherefore, following the holy Fathers, we all with one voice confess our Lord Jesus Christ one and the same Son, the same perfect in Godhead, the same perfect in manhood, truly God and truly man, the same consisting of a reasonable soul and a body, of one substance with the Father as touching the Godhead, the same of one substance with us as touching the manhood, 'like us in all things apart from sin'; begotten of the Father before the ages as touching the Godhead, the same in the last days, for us and for our salvation, born from the Virgin Mary, the Theotokos, as touching the manhood, one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation; the distinction of natures being in no way abolished because of the union, but rather the characteristic property of each nature being preserved and concurring into one person and one substance (*hypostasis*), not as if Christ were parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son and only-begotten God, Word, Lord, Jesus Christ; even as the prophets from the beginning spoke concerning him, and our Lord Jesus Christ instructed us, and the Creed of the Fathers has handed down to us.<sup>7</sup>

It was the decision of the council that the Son is a single person with two inextricably connected natures: that of divinity and humanity.<sup>8</sup> This interpretation holds that neither the constitutive features of deity nor humanity were abandoned in the historical act of the Incarnation. The Son is both eternal, transcendent God and limited, *physical* human. Of immediate interest to the commentator is the terminology utilized by the framers of this formulation. The word *hypostasis* (Greek for "that which stands beneath"<sup>9</sup>) is used here in a novel sense. Prior to Chalcedon *hypostasis* was typically construed merely as a synonym of *ousia*<sup>10</sup> ("essence" or "substance"); it here refers to the unique individual reality of the God-Man,<sup>11</sup> not simply to substance or nature in general. In short, the orthodox understanding of the Incarnation is concerned with emphasizing the Son's unity: he is a single hypostasis with two fully realized natures. It is our contention (discussed at greater length below) that even this nuanced understanding of the Son's two natures cannot mitigate a key ontological difficulty: the contradiction inherent in claiming that a single person has (at least) a partly material nature and an entirely immaterial one.

Since Berkeley was an Anglican bishop, our presentation of the Incarnation would be deficient if we failed to offer what can be considered the orthodox Anglican conception of this doctrine. The Anglican understanding is best expressed in the Articles of Religion—a series of pronouncements first published for the Anglican Church in 1571. The articles have remained essentially unchanged to the present. Article II describes Jesus Christ as that person in which “two whole and perfect Natures, that is to say, Godhead and Manhood, were joined together in one Person.” The Article is instructive and worth considering in its entirety.

The Son, which is the Word of the Father, begotten from everlasting of the Father, the very and eternal God, and of one substance with the Father, took Man’s nature in the womb of the blessed Virgin, of her substance: so that two whole and perfect natures, that is to say, the Godhead and Manhood, were joined together in one Person, never to be divided, whereof is one Christ, very God, and very Man; who truly suffered, was crucified, dead, and buried, to reconcile his Father to us, and to be a sacrifice, not only for original guilt, but also for all actual sins of men.<sup>12</sup>

Even a casual comparison of the content of this passage reveals its essentially Chalcedonian nature. Further, given the emphasis placed here upon the human experiences of the Son we think that a short (but instructive) consideration of pertinent Scriptural testimony is helpful. In general, available evidence describes the Son’s sojourn on earth as the period in which he possessed a body *in the same sense* that finite human beings are said to possess theirs. Even if we set aside the passages which record how Christ was “born” or “begotten”<sup>13</sup> and interpretations which argue that the Son had pre-Incarnation physical manifestations,<sup>14</sup> the Scriptures do not shrink from telling the reader how he, at least during the ministry recorded in the Gospels, had the same kind of embodied experiences normal, mortal human beings do. He grew (“increased in stature,” as Luke 2:52 reminds us), hungered (Luke 4:2), was wearied (John 4:6), felt pain (Luke 22:44), and bled (John 19:34). In addition, his post-crucifixion-and-resurrection appearances to his disciples are replete with body imagery (John 20:27 and Luke 24:39–40).

To summarize, orthodox Anglicanism and Scriptural testimony point to the Incarnation as the event wherein the Word “took up” a human body (a body essentially identical in nature with those that other finite human persons possess) without sacrificing its divine nature. Furthermore, it is clear that Berkeley agrees with this assessment. For Berkeley, the form the Incarnation took—as “the Son of God . . . born upon earth in a poor family”<sup>15</sup>—is a fundamentally mysterious doctrine, not because it teaches the absurd (endorses an explicit contradiction), but rather because it proclaims the working out of the hidden plan of God.

*The "Problem" of the Incarnation*

The difficulty with which we are concerned centers on the apparently incoherent nature of the hypostasis proposed by the Council of Chalcedon. The God-man is said to simultaneously exemplify both human and divine qualities. If jointly these qualities can be shown to entail a contradiction, then the plausibility of the Incarnation is cast into question. There are a number of concerns on this score, including whether the Son can be both divinely timeless and humanly temporal, possessing faculties both human and divine, and so on.<sup>16</sup> We have nothing to say about these other potential worries, and take no position on whether and how they might be resolved.

There is a distinct problem raised by the supposition that Christ in his human nature had a material body, while in his divine aspect is wholly immaterial. According to orthodox thought, Christ was human and possessed a body in the exact same manner that finite, created humans do. As a result, one may not escape the problem of having to characterize the nature of Christ's body. If one is a materialist and takes human bodies to be even partially composed of material substance then the orthodox Christian is committed to the claim that Christ's body also has a material component. The Chalcedon formulation explicitly stipulates that the Son is "one person and one substance." Thus, even if one argues that the natures of the Son have different ontological foundations (e.g., the Son qua human has a material component while the Son qua divine is entirely immaterial), one must nonetheless provide an account of the ontic status of the person of the *God-man*. The possibilities are varied and many of them are troubling. One might choose to deny that matter and spirit are really substances at all; there is only the one substance (God) and matter and spirit are simply "natures" of the same. Spinoza famously proposed such a property dualism, but it has long been rejected by mainstream Christianity, in part because such a view is not easily reconcilable with the notion of a personal God. Many opt to argue that God is entirely immaterial but created material substance. Yet if one contends that God is an immaterial substance, then the *person* is immaterial and it is difficult to understand how an immaterial unity could have a "nature" that is material since matter is, by all accounts, incommensurable with spiritual substance. The modern view of matter sees it as an unthinking, extended substance. Within the context of this view material and immaterial substances are strictly incommensurable.<sup>17</sup> Further, 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.

Most of the prominent solutions to the ontological problem of reconciling the Son's human and divine natures invoke Scholastic ontologies that use the concepts of prime matter and substantial form. Eleonore Stump, for instance, defends an Aquinian reading of the Incarnation.<sup>18</sup> On her interpretation of Aquinas, Christ assumes a substantial form that configures matter into a

human body and confers on that composite the properties essential to humanity. Christ has two natures and likewise two sets of operations, one proper to his divinity and one proper to his humanity, from which it follows (on her reading) that Christ has two intellects and two wills.<sup>19</sup> The multiplicity of natures allows different things to be true of each of these intellects and wills. The human intellect may be ignorant of propositions the divine intellect knows to be true and Christ may will in accord with his divine will without sin. Initially one might worry that such an account pushes one to admit that there are *two* persons instead of one. Stump ably appeals to Aquinas to note that the unity of Christ is not a unity of nature, but something different. The human body and soul of Christ do not constitute a *human* person because in this singular case the body and soul are a part of a larger whole, namely the person of Christ.

Because the substantial form and the matter it configures are part of a larger composite, which includes the second person of the Trinity and the divine nature, in this one case, the substantial form of a human being and the matter it configures do not constitute a human person. If they existed on their own, outside the composite which is the incarnate Christ, the human soul and body of Christ would certainly constitute a human person. But conjoined in Christ, they do not, in virtue of being subsumed into the larger whole. There is therefore just one person in Christ, and that person is divine.<sup>20</sup>

Known as the reduplicative strategy, Stump attempts to mitigate the putatively inconsistent traits in the God-man hypostasis by arguing that Christ has varying properties that are predicated not of his *person*, but of his natures. She argues, for instance that

The fact that both limited and unlimited power are attributed to Christ does not show the Chalcedonian formula of the incarnation to be incoherent, because omnipotence is predicated of Christ in his divine nature and lack of omnipotence is predicated of him in his human nature.<sup>21</sup>

On this reading, incompatible attributes are “segregated” from one another by virtue of the fact that they inhere in different natures. Within the context of Aquinas’ compositional account of the Incarnation, where human nature is subsumed into the configuring hypostasis of the divine, the reduplicative strategy is plausible. “There is no reason,” Stump notes, “for denying that Christ can have properties borrowed from either his human nature or his divine nature, even if the natures are not integral parts of Christ and the properties are contradictories.”<sup>22</sup>

Stump does *not*, however, explicitly address the underlying ontological problem: the incoherence intrinsic to positing that the Son is both fully immaterial and partly material in the Incarnation. There is no avoiding the entailment that, for materialists, the possession of a human nature *includes* the

possession of a material human body. We can reasonably extend her analysis, however, to cover this question. Applying the logic of reduplicative propositions, one could argue that the Son possessed a material human body *qua* his human nature and remained wholly immaterial *qua* his divine nature. If one accepts the supposition that a single entity can exemplify incompatible traits by virtue of the fact that these traits are “borrowed” from the constituent natures and are traits of the whole only derivatively, then the reduplicative strategy initially appears to mitigate the problems materialism poses for the Incarnation.

We argue, however, that several considerations tell against this conclusion. First, the coherence of the reduplicative strategy depends (at least in the case of Stump) on one’s acceptance of an Aquinian view of metaphysics and composition, especially the concepts of substantial form and *materia prima*. The latter concept is mostly alien to audiences today. For instance, Berkeley (along with most early moderns) rejects outright such concepts as prime matter and Aristotelian form.

But say you, they are extension in general, and motion in general: thus we see how much the tenet of extended, moveable substances existing without the mind, depends on that strange doctrine of abstract ideas. And here I cannot but remark, how nearly the vague and indeterminate description of matter or corporeal substance, which the modern philosophers are run into by their own principles, resembles that antiquated and so much ridiculed notion of *materia prima*, to be met with in Aristotle and his followers.<sup>23</sup>

Late in his life Berkeley would argue that by *matter* Aristotle did not intend corporeal substance at all, but rather a collection of privations.<sup>24</sup> Although respectful of Aristotle, Berkeley clearly does not understand the body of Christ to involve matter that signifies “no positive actual thing” and that is only “made up of negatives.”<sup>25</sup> Such an understanding is consonant with the reading Stump gives to the Aquinian solution, but it is generally no longer accepted by modern and contemporary thinkers. We hold with Berkeley that the concept of matter that Aquinas—and by extension Stump—employs is not the same concept believers typically employ today. As a result, even if Stump’s analysis has merit, it does not threaten our purposes here. Here we seek to explore a solution to the problems raised by orthodox conceptions of the Incarnation that does not appeal to Scholastic metaphysics.

Even though the strategy pursued by Stump falls outside of the aims of our analysis, we have other reservations about the kind of Scholastic solution she proposes. To start with, it is not clear on her reading *what* (ontologically) the Son actually is. Christ *assumes* a substantial form, but therefore is *not* one (at least *qua* unitary divinity). Yet according to Aquinas, all that ultimately in actuality exists is substance, so the many claims of Christianity (in particular that God is *actus purus* and an immaterial substance<sup>26</sup>) are made unreasonably

dubious. Saying that God is a person and a unity is all well and good, but unless one is willing to surrender the coherence of one's metaphysical assumptions, *some* ontological status must be given to God (beyond the trivial claim that God exists). The common Christian claim that God is an (or *the*) immaterial substance makes sense; it is not always obvious how the Aquinian alternative Stump proposes does.<sup>27</sup>

Even if we allow one of the natures of the Son to have a material component, such an admission engenders considerable difficulties. For a start, it would imply that a part of God is or includes an inactive substance, contrary to the orthodox understanding of God as an eminently active agent. It is independently not clear how a robust, mind-independent substance is reconcilable *even under a distinct nature* with the wholly immaterial nature of the divine. It is not a matter of the person of Christ *having* distinct properties under distinct natures, but rather the person of Christ *being* (or being composed of) different substances under distinct natures—a much more implausible consequence to accept. Substances are not predicated of other substances, so Stump's reduplicative strategy that is so promising in the cases of incompatible properties does not have the same success when applied to the basic ontic status of the Incarnate Son.

Lastly, the reduplicative strategy, at least for this particular case, is ultimately incapable of mitigating the problem associated with divine possession of a material human body. The claim is that the Son in his human nature is fully human. The reduplicative strategy works only if the mind-body dualism assumed by the view is also clear and coherent. 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? If this relationship cannot be adequately explained, then there is little reason to suppose that recourse to the reduplicative strategy to explain how God, as an immaterial being, can be partly material in his Incarnation will solve the present issue; the reduplicative strategy works by "pushing off" putatively incompatible traits onto separate natures. The question now becomes how the Son, even qua human, can be a matter-spirit composite. The promise of our immaterialist alternative is that even such derivative complications can be solved.

We are here interested in presenting a materialist-neutral account of human nature that coherently explains the possession of a human body by God. An immaterialist reading of the Incarnation, we argue, avoids the difficulties inherent in materialist readings of this possession without undermining the force of solutions of thinkers like Stump, who is concerned with reconciling the putatively incompatible traits of the God-man wherever they might be found. We argue that our solution, by removing this one difficulty in understanding human nature and thus the Son's possession of human nature, sets the stage for other philosophically-compelling explanatory strat-



gies. A principled immaterialist reading of the Incarnation not only fulfills the demands of orthodox faith but makes other philosophical analyses of the Incarnation *better* by removing one problem that vexes the materialist Christian: the problem associated with the possession of a human body by the Son. With this problem out of the way, the strategies noted here can do their work in explaining other, ontologically-neutral (i.e. not dependent on any particular ontology) difficulties.

To set the stage for our alternative, we want first to summarize the ontological problem of the Incarnation as it might appear to an immaterialist Christian. Berkeley, as an Anglican, operates within a specific theological context. Biblical and historical evidence describe God as an essentially immaterial being. Article I of the 39 Articles states that “there is but one living and true God, everlasting, without body, parts, or passions”—a view consonant with Biblical testimony.<sup>28</sup> Berkeley certainly accepted this characterization of God as well. In the preface to the *Principles* he exclaims:

What I here make public has, after a long and scrupulous inquiry, seem'd to me evidently true, and not unuseful to be known, particularly to those who are tainted with skepticism, or want a demonstration of the existence and immateriality of God, or the natural immortality of the soul.<sup>29</sup>

For Christians, Berkeley included, God is an active, *immaterial*, and transcendent intellect who reveals himself by governing the operations of the physical world. The Son, who partakes fully in divine nature, has no material component. Yet, as the Chalcedonian formulation maintains, “fully human” entails the possession both of an immaterial soul and a body.

Within the context of modern materialism this formulation runs into an apparently insurmountable problem: substance dualists hold that human bodies are material things. Christ, as available evidence and orthodox tradition makes clear, possessed a human body. Thus if one wants to insist that the body of Christ entails something material, then the hypostatic union described by the Council of Chalcedon and the 39 Articles mandates that the Son be understood as simultaneously wholly immaterial and partially material. For the materialist, “fully human” entails that the Son had a material nature, i.e., consisted at least in part of material substance. “Fully divine,” however, entails that he did *not* have a material nature. For Berkeley—as indeed for anyone—contradictions are absurdities. As a result, the modern materialist Christian has an intractable problem: the “new” materialist metaphysic does not allow for the simultaneous co-exemplification of materiality and divinity. This difficulty undermines the Chalcedonian formulation of the Incarnation and renders the doctrine fundamentally contrary-to-reason. It is not merely a question of mystery here—the very coherency of Jesus Christ the individual is undermined by this inconsistency.

*Berkeley's Ontology*

Can Berkeley as our representative immaterialist do better? The mere denial of the existence of material substance does not completely resolve the issue, since one might reasonably expect Berkeley to provide an account of the Incarnation that is consonant with its description in Scripture. Such an account would have to preserve enough mystery to generate and sustain faith without creating absurdities of its own. To see how Berkeley might accomplish this task, we first need to present in outline the key relevant elements of his philosophical system. In the following section we then explore the details of how a Christian immaterialist might embrace the Incarnation of Christ.

Of immediate importance is Berkeley's contention that fundamentally only two kinds of things exist: minds and ideas. In the *Principles* he is quite clear.

Nothing seems of more importance, towards erecting a firm system of sound and real knowledge, which may be proof against the assaults of *skepticism*, than to lay the beginning in a distinct explication of what is meant by *thing, reality, existence*: for in vain shall we dispute concerning the real existence of things, or pretend to any knowledge thereof, so long as we have not fixed the meaning of those words. *Thing* or *being* is the most general name of all, it comprehends under it two kinds entirely distinct and heterogeneous, and which have nothing common but the name, to wit, *spirits* and *ideas*. The former are *active, indivisible substances*: the latter are *inert, fleeting dependent beings*, which subsist not by themselves, but are supported by, or exist in minds or spiritual substances.<sup>30</sup>

Berkeley's ontology consists of minds, which are immaterial substances, and ideas, which are "fleeting dependent beings," that represent the content of the experienced world. Both are "real" in any sense that matters. In our ordinary experience of the world, what we actually engage are sensory items (sights, feels, sounds, etc.—what Berkeley calls *ideas*).

The ideas imprinted on the senses by the Author of Nature are called *real things*: and those excited in the imagination being less regular, vivid and constant, are more properly termed *ideas*, or *images of things*, which they copy and represent. But then our sensations, be they never so vivid and distinct, are nevertheless *ideas*, that is, they exist in the mind, or are perceived by it as truly as the ideas of its own framing.<sup>31</sup>

Thus the commonsense objects we perceive (e.g., chairs, tables, and stones) are in fact collections of well-ordered sensory ideas.

And as several of these [sensory ideas] are observed to accompany each other, they come to be marked by one name, and so to be reputed as one

thing. Thus, for example, a certain colour, taste, smell, figure and consistency having been observed to go together, are accounted one distinct thing, signified by the name *apple*. Other collections of ideas constitute a stone, a tree, a book, and the like sensible things. . . .<sup>32</sup>

That the view is unusual was not unappreciated by Berkeley, who took careful pains to argue that the initial oddness of his philosophy was no bar to its being true.

But, say you, it sounds very harsh to say we eat and drink ideas, and are clothed with ideas. I acknowledge it does so, the word *idea* not being used in common discourse to signify the several combinations of sensible qualities, which are called *things*: and is certain that any expression which varies from the familiar use of language, will seem harsh and ridiculous. But this doth not concern the truth of the proposition, which in other words is not more than to say, we are fed and clothed with those things which we perceive immediately by our senses.<sup>33</sup>

Read charitably, Berkeley's basic ontology is not absurd at all. Note, however, that we are not here defending the truth of his metaphysical system. Rather, we are simply arguing for the narrower claim that an immaterialist metaphysic is a better "fit" with Christian dogma. The merits of immaterialism as an ontology lie outside the scope of this endeavor.

The main target of Berkeley's analysis is the supposition that there exists a *mind-independent* substance (matter). For Berkeley, "there is no other substance than *spirit*."<sup>34</sup> Berkeley argues that matter, as an alleged mind-independent *substratum* of sensible ideas, is not only unnecessary but contradictory. Later in *Principles* 7 he remarks:

But for the fuller proof of this point, let it be considered, the sensible qualities are colour, figure, motion, smell, taste, and such like, that is, the ideas perceived by sense. Now for an idea to exist in an unperceiving thing, is a manifest contradiction; for to have an idea is all one as to perceive: that therefore wherein colour, figure, and the like qualities exist, must perceive them; hence it is clear there can be no unthinking substance or *substratum* of those ideas.

We know that our minds exist from simple introspection. We know that we have sensory experiences (perceive ideas).<sup>35</sup> We are not, however, entitled to conclude that there must be some mind-independent support of those ideas.

One might wonder, however, how Berkeley can explain the seeming independence of the world. One cannot simply will an idea and have it become reality. Such an objection betrays a serious misunderstanding of his metaphysics. According to Berkeley, sensory ideas are *ontologically dependent* on some mind or other (and ultimately on the mind of God), but *volitionally independent* of finite minds. God decides what sensory ideas we perceive

(and in what order). As an additional benefit, Berkeley believes that his contention that ideas are intrinsically (ontologically) dependent entities yet independent of our volitions points directly to the existence of God. To Berkeley, because ideas "depend not on my thought . . . there must be another mind wherein they exist."<sup>36</sup> As a result, we have a new argument for the necessity and hence existence of God. "And yet this consistent uniform working, which so evidently displays the goodness and wisdom of that governing spirit whose will constitutes the Laws of Nature. . . ."<sup>37</sup>

The immaterialism advanced by Berkeley preserves the independence of the "real" world by making our sensory ideas volitionally independent of us while simultaneously holding that only minds and ideas properly exist.<sup>38</sup> Commonsense physical objects, including the bodies "owned" by finite minds or souls, are collections of well-ordered sensory ideas that are perceived by minds. Ideas exist when perceived and thus the existence of commonsense objects is ultimately preserved by the omnipercipience of God: God perceives everything. A related upshot of this analysis is that immaterialists have the resources to allow for "public" objects. Since ideas are volitionally independent of minds, it is logically possible for individual minds to perceive the numerically same ideas, providing a world of public things. It is simply an unfounded prejudice to think that ideas are unique (or "private") to the minds that perceive them, especially for Berkeley, who never makes any such claim (at least not explicitly).<sup>39</sup> For our purposes, even if some immaterialists want ideas to be private, there is no bar to our constructing a system (like Berkeley's) where some ideas may be public. With this admittedly brief overview, we now have the resources to construct an immaterialist understanding of the doctrine of the Incarnation.

### *Immaterialism and Incarnation*

In addition to arguing that immaterialism constitutes a better explanation of the world in which we live, Berkeley also joins us in alleging that immaterialism provides a better support for the claims of Christianity. Here it is worth reiterating that a quality immaterialist must advance an understanding of the doctrine that renders it both not absurd (i.e., does not entail a contradiction) yet still with an element of mystery sufficient to inspire faith. Our initial problem is that we have too much mystery in the face of obvious inconsistency. In the case of the Incarnation, the impact of an immaterialist system is immediately appreciable: by removing material substance the pressing contradiction is removed. The Son would not, within the immaterialist system, simultaneously possess a *material* body while necessarily being wholly immaterial (of one substance with God).

Simply removing the initial contradiction, however, is insufficient, since the Christian immaterialist must now provide an explanation of the Incarnation that is consistent with Scripture and Christian dogma while retaining the

miraculous nature of the event. We are now ready to see how such a position may be constructed by applying Berkeley's metaphysical system to the present issue. We should note, however, that the view we are now advancing is not actually Berkeley's. To our knowledge, Berkeley nowhere explicitly defends a theory of the Incarnation, aside from a few cryptic remarks that do not constitute a considered theory. What we present here is an immaterialist account of the Incarnation designed to be minimally *consistent* with Berkeley's ontology.

For an immaterialist, having a body entails having a certain ordered series of sensible ideas. In its simplest formulation, an immaterialist account of the Incarnation can be expressed as the event wherein the infinite mind of God came to stand in a certain relationship with a series of sensible ideas. To be more explicit, the Son had the experiences that attend the possession of a human body. Most importantly, he had the same kind of experiences *in the same way* that human beings ordinarily do.

The Chalcedonian formulation of the Incarnation and Scriptural testimony hold that the Son possesses a body without sacrificing his divinity. On our modern reading, Berkeley's metaphysics does not require that God relinquish his divinity in order to perceive an ordered series of ideas—his status as an active, immaterial being is not compromised by his entering into a new relationship (a finite, personal one) with physical things (collections of ordered sensory ideas). Berkeley holds that God is the same *kind* of being as humans (i.e., an active, immaterial mind<sup>40</sup>). Remove the limits and the imperfections of the finite soul and you have God.<sup>41</sup> Thus, as God is of the same kind as finite human minds, and human minds are connected with bodies, there is no metaphysical bar to God being capable of a similar action. The Son's sojourn on earth can be seen as the simultaneous exposure of the divine mind to the human condition *and* the retention of its omnipercipience.

When the Son took human form, he did so by freely choosing to restrict his omnipercipience to the kinds of ideas (and their orderings) that the finite minds of humans typically experience. Thus, although the Son was divine and a perfect spirit, both he and the persons who witnessed his earthly ministry interacted with a limited being. The primary difference is that while normal mortals are of their nature constrained to perceive as they do, Christ the Son perceived as a human person voluntarily. That our reading is consonant with what Berkeley had in mind is suggested in a note he wrote for a sermon—one of the few places where he mentions the Incarnation at all.<sup>42</sup> "God rendered more visible not more present, by incarnation. Light of the sun unpolluted."<sup>43</sup> The Incarnation does not make God more present in the world, but rather *more accessible* ("visible"). The second sentence is a reference to Berkeley's repeated claim that God can be related to ideas that are limited and corrupt without thereby being impugned by the relation. The light that shines on a corrupt physical object is not in any way damaged or diminished by the object on which it shines.<sup>44</sup> Extending that analysis, when the Son

chose to take up only the ideas perceived by finite minds, his choosing to have that kind of relation did not alter or diminish the divine mind that did the perceiving.

One might raise a concern here. Berkeley's system holds firstly that God is the originator and upholder of all sensible ideas and secondly that these ideas are volitionally independent of human minds. How can a single individual both produce a series of ideas and simultaneously stand in an essentially passive relationship to them? This objection, though expressed in language unique to our immaterialist solution, plagues *all* attempts of explicating the Chalcedonian formulation. How, after all, can the Son be said to "uphold all things by the word of his power"<sup>45</sup> *and* be born, suffer, and die? The events that shape his life are oddly the very things he upholds. The problem is perfectly general: how can a divine being, one without limits or imperfections, choose to be limited and imperfect in a finite human body?

We argue that this difficulty cannot be entirely ameliorated without undermining the *mystery* of the Incarnation, and it is not our intention to provide an unchallengeable solution to this problem. In short, on our reading a genuinely miraculous mystery remains; we have simply removed an odious and obvious contradiction from its formulation. There is nothing *prima facie* incoherent about supposing that the Son, by the voluntary exercise of his will, chose to limit himself in his relation to a series of sensible ideas (e.g., his body) for a specified period of time, and there is little reason to suppose that this action necessarily compromised his divine nature. In short, our answer to this objection is that the Son's *choice* to stand in a passive relationship with his earthly body testifies both to his authority as creator and upholder of sensible ideas, and to the highly personal character of his earthly mission.

One might additionally worry that our reading of the Incarnation is superficially similar to a kenotic understanding of the Incarnation. Kenotic (Greek for "self-emptying"—see Philippians 2:5–11) Christology, formulated and popularized in the nineteenth century, aims to mitigate many of the traditional difficulties with the Chalcedonian formulation by arguing that the Son voluntarily divested himself of divine nature without forsaking any essential divine attributes. A short explication of the thinking of Gottfried Thomasius, prominent nineteenth-century theologian, is helpful here.<sup>46</sup> According to Thomasius, many of the attributes traditionally associated with the divine nature—such as omnipotence, omniscience, etc.—are fundamentally relative: "they are the external manifestations of the immanent, or essential, divine attributes."<sup>47</sup> They are intrinsically connected with God's transcendent relationship with the created realm, and this relationship is *not* an essential divine attribute. The Incarnation was, on the kenotic reading, the event wherein the Son voluntarily divested himself of the characteristically divine nature of his relationship with the physical realm. He, in becoming man, did not cease *being* God. Contemporary theologian David Crisp identifies two basic categories within kenotic Christology: ontological

and functional. The ontological kenotic thinker argues that the Word "abdicates certain divine properties" for a specific duration—either during his sojourn on earth, or, alternatively, for all subsequent moments following his initial Incarnation.<sup>48</sup> The advocate of the functionalist reading contends that the Word elects not to employ any of his divine powers, but chooses simply to not exercise them while Incarnate. Crisp rejects both of these views, instead arguing for what he calls "kryptic Christology."<sup>49</sup> By his own admission, however, kryptic Christology turns out to be a form of functional kenotism.<sup>50</sup>

The consonance of our reading with the general trend of kenotic Christology is immediately apparent: we too argue that the mere alteration of the Son's relationship with the physical world (read, by some kenotic thinkers, as the divesting of "divine glory") does not entail the surrender of essential divine attributes. Where our reading of the Incarnation differs from this understanding is in its insistence on the immaterialist ontology as the only viable option in interpreting the possession of a human body by God. In a sense, our explication is extremely limited in intent; it seeks to explode one fundamental difficulty with traditional readings of the Incarnation and makes no attempt to solve or explain other apparent inconsistencies in the God-man's nature. None of the proponents of the kenotic reading of the Incarnation deny that the (immaterial) Son of God took up a body as part of his divestment of divine attributes. Within the context of the materialist metaphysic, this means that the Son took up a *material* body, a move that entails an incoherence in the hypostasis of the God-man. In the end, though we lack the space and inclination to explicate and judge the greater merits of Gottfried's "surrender of divinity" argument and Crisp's concerns about ontological and functional kenotic accounts, we argue that our reading preserves the virtues of its rivals without sacrificing their merits. An immaterialist reading does not require either a functionalist or ontological kenotic interpretation of the Incarnation although it is clearly *compatible* with the functionalist account. We are primarily concerned with the constraints on the Incarnation introduced by Chalcedon.

We argue that if one is interested in preserving the coherence of the person of the God-man then one should welcome the addition of the immaterialist metaphysic to the Christian philosopher's arsenal. Reading our immaterialist account of the Incarnation within the context of the kenotic emphasis upon the voluntary divestment of divine attributes by the Son is a legitimate and interesting move, as long as one recognizes that only a principled consideration and adoption of immaterialism is capable of overcoming a fundamental difficulty in the logic of the Incarnation: the possession of a human body by God. Nonetheless, the immaterialist is not, we argue, committed to a kenotic view of the Incarnation. We merely argue that there are consonances between such accounts and our own, consonances that do not preclude the possibility of a rigorously Chalcedonian reading of the Incarnation in immaterialist

terms. Our intent here is limited: we seek to remove one fundamental difficulty that plagues traditional understandings of the Incarnation.

### *Objections and Replies*

Despite the attractions of our immaterialist reading, we recognize that some might be hesitant to accept our claim that immaterialism is a better ontology for Christians than some form of materialism. The most pertinent objections to the account of the Incarnation advanced here can be grouped under two heads: those launched on theological grounds and those motivated by philosophical difficulties native to Berkeleyan metaphysics. We now turn to engage the most pressing of these concerns, each in turn.

### *Is Immaterialist Christianity Gnostic?*

The wary theologian or church historian might be tempted to label our immaterialist reading of the Incarnation as essentially gnostic in content. "Gnosticism" refers to a diverse religious movement characterized by several interrelated ideas. One of those beliefs typically labeled gnostic is that the material universe is intrinsically flawed (and thus sinful). This conception of the universe has profound implications for the Incarnation. In particular, it informs the heretical docetist claim that the historical person Jesus Christ was a "human disguise worn by the supernatural Christ whose principal function was to reveal the spiritual world."<sup>51</sup> His body was, in short, a kind of illusion. Docetism, in denying that the Son (in his Incarnation) was both fully human and fully divine, is fundamentally opposed to the Chalcedonian formulation. Given our denial of the existence of material substance and our identification of the Son's body as a series of well-ordered sensory ideas, the casual reader might conclude that our immaterialist reading is heretical in just this sense. To be clear, the charge is that adopting immaterialism *forces* one into accepting docetism.

The plausibility of this objection is predicated upon a common misunderstanding concerning Berkeley's immaterialism: that it reduces the sensible world to a series of fleeting and insubstantial images that have no genuine reality. The pious critic, in light of our explication of the Incarnation in immaterialist terms *and armed with this flawed misconception*, would not be amiss in questioning the orthodoxy of Berkeley's metaphysic. Such a judgment, however, would be fundamentally mistaken, because it fails to capture what Berkeley's system actually entails regarding the external world. In the *Three Dialogues* he explicitly engages a charge of this nature:

You talked often as if you thought I maintained the non-existence of sensible things: whereas in truth no one can be more thoroughly assured of their existence than I am: and it is you who doubt; I should have said,



positively deny it. Everything that is seen, felt, heard, or any way perceived by the senses, is on the principles I embrace, a real being, but not on yours [i.e., materialism].<sup>52</sup>

Berkeley need not be guilty of the docetist heresy because he does not deny that Christ had a body *in the same sense* that human beings are said to possess theirs. In his denial of matter Berkeley denies exactly what heretics of this stripe fear: that the Son could have united himself with something corrupt. Further, Berkeley nowhere denies either the attribution of true humanness to the Son or of the reality of the events that occurred. In response to a similar challenge about miracles in general, Berkeley writes with some exasperation:

But it will be urged, that miracles do, at least, lose much of their stress and import by our principles. What must we think of Moses's rod, was it not *really* turned into a serpent, or was there only a change of *ideas* in the minds of the spectators? And can it be supposed, that our Saviour did no more at the marriage-feast in Cana, than impose on the sight, and smell, and taste of the guests, so as to create in them the appearance or idea only of wine? The same may be said of all other miracles: which, in consequence of the foregoing principles, must be looked upon only as so many cheats, or illusions of fancy. To this I reply, that the rod was changed into a real serpent, and the water into real wine. . . . I shall only observe, that if at table all who were present should see, and smell, and taste, and drink wine, and find the effects of it, with me there could be no doubt of its reality. So that, at bottom, the scruple concerning real miracles hath no place at all on ours, but only on the received principles, and consequently maketh rather *for*, than *against* what hath been said.<sup>53</sup>

The immaterialist account does not alter the importance or the reality of the miracle of God Incarnate. Thus the ontology one chooses to endorse is technically independent of the charge of docetism. As we have sought to demonstrate here, Berkeley in particular is not compelled to endorse any docetist account. The skeptic might, however, wish to press a related difficulty. While Berkeley's metaphysics necessarily commits him to reject the claim that sinfulness inheres in materiality, one might question what our attribution of finite ideas to the Son entails. Is it not after all reasonable to suppose that sin might also reside in the perception of finite sensible ideas? The best solution to this particular worry was foreshadowed earlier in the note Berkeley wrote observing that light is not corrupted by the objects on which it shines. The immaterial mind is not soiled or limited by the fact that it perceives ideas that may be corrupt or defective. To suggest otherwise would require that God not be able to know of evil or ignorance in the world. Berkeley is rightly careful to ascribe sinfulness to the improper exercise of the human will and not to any independent feature of his ontology. Ideas are passive and dependent beings, but as a part of God's creation there is nothing sinful about them.

Sin lies only in how we choose to act in light of the ideas we perceive. *Agents* are sinful, not things. Thus locating sinfulness in the perception of sensible ideas makes no sense. More directly, Berkeley holds that God is the ground and ultimate guarantor of the sensible world. Since God is good, it is impious to label that which he generates and upholds as sinful. In the *Three Dialogues* Berkeley argues that:

I farther observe, that sin or moral turpitude doth not consist in the outward physical action or motion, but in the internal deviation of the will from the laws of reason and religion. This is plain, in that the killing an enemy in a battle, or putting a criminal legally to death, is not thought sinful, though the outward act be the very same with that in the case of murder. Since therefore sin doth not consist in the physical action, the making God an immediate cause of all such actions, is not making him the author of sin.<sup>54</sup>

The Son, by taking up a human body in the way described, did *not* thus take up sinfulness. This charge is, in the final analysis, without merit, for there is nothing in the immaterialist account that *requires* one to be docetist.

#### *Pleasures and Pains*

The offered immaterialist explication of the Incarnation, though it mitigates a particularly vexing problem (that of divinity and materiality), introduces what might appear to be a separate intractable difficulty of its own: what we shall here call the problem of pleasures and pains. In general, this problem is concerned with the incommensurability of God's perfect, immutable nature (e.g. he cannot, among other things, suffer pain or enjoy pleasure) and the bodily trials recorded in the Gospels. Given the testimony of the Scriptures, how can we say that Christ the man was also God? The philosophical commitments of the immaterialist, and Berkeley in particular, appear to preclude a satisfactory answer. For Berkeley, God generates and perceives the self-same ideas we do but does not *sense* or *suffer* them in the way that we do and Christ did. In *The Three Dialogues* Berkeley notes:

That God knows or understands all things, and that He knows among other things what pain is, even every sort of painful sensation, and what it is for His creatures to suffer pain, I make no question. But that God, though He knows and sometimes causes painful sensations in us, can Himself suffer pain, I positively deny. We who are limited and dependent spirits, are liable to impressions of sense, the effects of an external agent, which being produced against our wills, are sometimes painful and uneasy. But God, whom no external being can affect, who perceives nothing by sense as we do, whose will is absolute and independent, causing all things, and liable to be thwarted by nothing; it is evident, such a being as this can suffer nothing, nor be affected by any painful sensation, or indeed any sensation at all.<sup>55</sup>

The relation between God and sensible ideas is one that allows for God's apprehension of the *concept* of pain but not his actual experience of it.

One initially promising response to this problem takes the Incarnation to serve the end of completing God's omniscience. God the Father does not suffer pain, but God nonetheless knows and understands the experience of pain through the vehicle of the Word incarnate. That is, part of the reason the Son came to earth was precisely to enable God to have the kind of knowledge possessed by finite minds (e.g., those who *endure* various experiences). God, being omnipotent, could have brought about our redemption in any number of ways, but chose the way which best accorded with his desire for closing this experiential gap. God, though knowing what pleasure and pain are, chose to enter into a new relationship with the sensible ideas he created and upholds so that he could truly understand what it means to suffer. The "Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us" (John 1:14) to showcase both God's glory and his paternal concern. This view is not entirely without precedent. Brian Hebblethwaite, for instance, argues that much of the appeal of the Incarnation lies in God's taking "responsibility for the suffering and evil entailed in creation by making himself vulnerable to it and by himself experiencing its pain and dereliction."<sup>56</sup> It is only in the Incarnation that God comes to fully *know* as man does and it is only by taking on a finite, human nature that he fully unites himself to his creation.

Unfortunately, this solution immediately raises another concern. Positing that the Incarnation was a vehicle partly designed to complete God's omniscience seems to entail that there was a point when God was not in fact omniscient. He once could not feel pain but *came to do so*. God, pre-Incarnation, lacked pertinent knowledge about his creation. A principled consideration of the pleasure/pain objection not only reveals a fundamental incongruity in Christ's nature but also questions the attribution of omniscience to God.

There are, however, several principled philosophical defenses one might invoke to maintain the coherence of our immaterialist reading of the Incarnation. First, one might argue that experiences of pleasure and pain are without content: to feel pain and pleasure is not to *know* anything. To say that God lacks an experiential component is not to say that he lacks omniscience. Berkeley, for instance, is explicit in his recognition of God's full knowledge of *what* pleasure and pain is. "God May comprehend all Ideas even the Ideas which are painfull & unpleasant without being in any degree pained thereby."<sup>57</sup> Thus God knows everything it is possible to *know* about pain and pleasure, since *experiencing* pains and pleasures does not actually produce knowledge. The success of this reply is tempered, of course, by two consequences that follow from its adoption. The first depends on whether one is willing to require that knowledge claims are only cognitive. If one believes that sensory experiences should be treated as objects of knowledge, then the reply will be less convincing. Second, adopting this reply limits the potential

benefit (that Hebblethwaite lauds) of being able to view God as a personal divinity interested in experiencing as his creatures do.

A final rejoinder might be to invoke the alleged atemporality of God, a Boethian-inspired move (among others) that Berkeley would also likely have found amenable. God did not *become* omniscient when the Incarnation occurred, because that event occurred temporally only in relation to finite minds. The events we characterize as occurring over time in fact are “timelessly” true for God. Hence it would be best to describe the Incarnation as that event wherein God *revealed* that particular facet of his omniscience. We have neither the space nor inclination to defend such a view in its entirety, but invoking the atemporality of God is sufficiently common that we trust that the informed reader will understand the motivation and initial plausibility of the response.

We contend, however, that another, more attractive, response awaits analysis. For Berkeley (as a quality representative of immaterialism), experiences of pleasure and pain are a feature of our finite, passive relationship with sensible ideas. The Incarnation was the event where the Son, by taking up a human body, subjected himself to those experiences inextricably associated with this finite relationship. Simply stated, God does not feel pleasure or pain *because* he stands in an intrinsically transcendent and active relationship with sensible ideas. Berkeley may be seen as endorsing this understanding of God as perceiver.

We are chained to a body, that is to say, our perceptions are connected with corporeal motions. By the Law of our Nature we are affected upon every alteration in the nervous parts of our sensible body: which sensible body rightly considered, is nothing but a complexion of such qualities or ideas, as have no existence distinct from being perceived by a mind: so that this connexion of sensations with corporeal motions, means no more than a correspondence in the order of Nature between two sets of ideas, or things immediately perceivable. But God is a pure spirit, disengaged from all such sympathy or natural ties. No corporeal motions are attended with the sensations of pain or pleasure in his mind. To know everything knowable is certainly a perfection; but to endure, or suffer, or feel anything by sense, is an imperfection. The former, I say, agrees to God, but not the latter. God knows or hath ideas; but His ideas are not convey'd to Him by sense, as ours are.<sup>58</sup>

The relationship between human beings and ideas is that of sensation, and the experience of pleasure and pain is intimately connected with this relationship. Human beings sense because God, in his infinite wisdom, has attached human minds to bodies (i.e., specific kinds of well-ordered collections of sensory ideas). These bodies stand in an intrinsically passive relationship with the sensible ideas which compose the universe. God, a transcendent spirit, stands outside the world of sense: he comprehends all

but does not sense, because sensation is the province of limited beings. That is, it is the nature of perfect beings to absolutely *know* their objects, whereas it is the nature of finite, imperfect beings, to sometimes *experience* (or *suffer*) their objects. In the Incarnation, the Son voluntarily divested himself of this transcendence with regard to his human body and in doing so rendered himself susceptible to the "corporeal motions" which attend pleasures and pains. At issue is not, we argue, God's omniscience but rather the difference between how human beings are *related* to sensible ideas and how God is related to those same ideas. Thus, there is no inconsistency in the doctrine of the Incarnation, as it is only the nature of the relationship between mind and ideas that has changed, and not the nature of the substance of God.

The attentive reader might immediately remind us of Berkeley's insistence that "to endure, suffer, or feel anything by sense, is an imperfection."<sup>59</sup> How can the Son be both perfect God and imperfect man? We should first point out that such an objection applies equally to *any* interpretation of the Incarnation and is not unique to immaterialist readings. We argue here that immaterialism is a better fit with this mystery, not that every mysterious aspect of the doctrine can be explained. Setting that caveat aside, the immaterialist nonetheless has a compelling line of response.

The emphasis Berkeley places here on the difference between a finite mind's relationship with sensible ideas and God's relationship with those same ideas does not entail the attribution of literal imperfection to the Son. There are (roughly speaking) two kinds of imperfection that are relevant. First there is the imperfection associated with simply being farther away from God. The Son, because of his voluntary self-limitation (during his earthly sojourn), can be said to be imperfect in this sense. This fact, however, is neither damaging nor heterodox. The sense of imperfection motivating the objection (and about which most people are concerned) is the sinful imperfection of a corrupted will. Such is the patristic understanding of imperfection;<sup>60</sup> in this sense the Word incarnate is not imperfect at all. Given Berkeley's support of the orthodox view of the Incarnation and his contention that sinfulness resides in the improper exercise of the human will, if one interprets imperfection as "lacking in full knowledge," then the Son was technically imperfect, but not in any sense that removes his divinity. He *voluntarily* made himself limited and hence in that sense imperfect.<sup>61</sup> God the Father is not constrained in this manner save in the voluntary self-limitation of the Incarnation. Further, there is no reason to suppose that the relation of sensory perception is inherently sinful and thus there is no reason to suppose God incapable of altering his relationship with sensible ideas in the manner described in the Incarnation. In doing so, he rendered himself susceptible to all those sufferings recorded in the Gospels—a fact which best accords with the pious sensibilities of men like Hebblethwaite, who locates the charm of this doctrine in God's unique entrance into the human condition.

*Immaterialism not Necessary?*

A final objection with which we have to contend is the claim that there are plausible materialist interpretations available which avoid the difficulties regarding the incompatibility of divine and human attributes. Thinkers both ancient and contemporary, well aware of the difficulties engendered by the Chalcedonian formulation, have offered various strategies to mitigate them—strategies that do not necessitate the adoption of an immaterialist ontology. One might, for instance, seek a kind of solution designed to fit exclusively with materialism. Lynne Rudder Baker, for instance, has argued that the doctrine of bodily resurrection is consistent with a version of material monism about human persons.<sup>62</sup> Her account, however, whatever its other virtues, does not well engage the problem of the Incarnation. 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? She herself even explicitly denies God's materiality. "Although I take ordinary humans to be essentially bodily (created that way by God), and I take it that the Word became flesh, I do not think that God is a material being."<sup>63</sup> Attempts to defend material monism must confront an obvious obstacle: the Christian God is not a material being and no orthodox Christian would believe otherwise.

Other philosophers have sought to defend more ontologically neutral understandings of the Incarnation, and one might try to argue that such a view can escape the alleged incoherence without resorting to immaterialism. Thomas D. Senor, for instance, utilizes the distinction between "common" and "essential" human properties to combat the apparently incoherent claim that (to give one example) Christ is both created and uncreated.<sup>64</sup> He argues that though Christians are (and should be) committed to the claim that the Son of God is an uncreated being, there is no reason to assume that "being created" is an essential attribute of human nature—it is merely a property that all human beings happen to share. Since this is the case, there is nothing incoherent in saying that Jesus Christ is both the uncreated Son of God and finite man, because there is no *prima facie* reason for supposing that the Son's human nature is a *created* nature. This analysis, he argues, extends to other attributes commonly considered problematic, such as God's omnipotence (as opposed to humanity's limited powers). In these types of cases, the supposed incoherence involved in saying that Christ is both infinite God and limited man is predicated upon an unexamined and unnecessary account of what is essential for being human. It is not our task here to examine the merits of this solution, but merely to present it as a plausible articulation of Chalcedon. We argue, however, that despite its success in mitigating *some* of the difficulties of the orthodox conception of the Incarnation, it does not sufficiently answer one other vexing problem—the explicitly ontological one with which we are concerned. Regardless of whether "having a body" is an essential or merely common human attribute, the Incarnation explicitly holds that the Son took

up a human body—and the simultaneous exemplification of God's immateriality and human materiality is incoherent.

To illustrate the enduring nature of this difficulty, consider the interpretation which Senor endorses, following the work of Thomas V. Morris. According to Morris, the Son (in his Incarnation) must be understood as possessing "two distinct ranges in consciousness" or, in other words, "two minds." This reading is, in the eyes of its formulators, a more plausible and comprehensive alternative to kenotic Christology because it does not entail or require that the Son surrender any of his divine attributes in any way in order to become fully human.<sup>65</sup> As Morris notes:

There is first what we call the eternal mind of God the Son with its distinctly divine consciousness, whatever that might be like, encompassing the full scope of omniscience. And in addition there is a distinctly earthly consciousness that came into existence and grew and developed as the boy Jesus grew and developed. . . . We can view the two ranges of consciousness (and, analogously, the two noetic structures encompassing them) as follows: The divine mind of God the Son contained, but was not contained by, his earthly mind, or range of consciousness.<sup>66</sup>

This view, Morris argues, accounts for the duality of natures found in Jesus Christ without compromising his divinity. The individual in question is fully human (in the words of Morris, he "experiences the world in a human perspective"<sup>67</sup>) and fully divine. The mind of God, without ceasing its normal, transcendent activities or relinquishing its exalted traits, could and did fully interact with a limited, naturally-generated human mind. The Son, while living the life of a man on earth, simultaneously exercised his divinity. He "upheld all things by the word of his power."<sup>68</sup> Morris clarifies this relationship by arguing that:

Insofar as Christ normally chose to live his earthly life out of his human resources alone, the words he spoke and the actions he performed by means of the body were words and actions arising out of his human mind. He had all the mental, intellectual, emotional, and volitional resources we all have . . . but this living of a human life through human resources was, on the two-minds view, going on at the same time that he, in his properly divine form of existence, was continuing to exercise his omnipotence, with the wisdom of his omniscience, in his omnipresent activities throughout creation.<sup>69</sup>

Before continuing, we must emphasize that this reading of the Incarnation is orthodox in nature. The two-minds view, as articulated by Morris, points to a basic feature of the hypostasis proposed by Chalcedon: to say that the God-man possesses two fully realized natures is to say, according to orthodox thought, that he possesses two simultaneously operative wills. As Jaroslav Pelikan notes in his *Spirit of Eastern Christendom*:

First the Lateran synod and then the Council of Constantinople, therefore, embedded their formulations on two actions and two wills into a recitation of the Chalcedonian creed, declaring that the two natures confessed there required also 'two natural wills and two natural actions, without division, without change, without separation, without confusion'. The Christology of Leo I, canonized at Chalcedon, required that each nature have its own will and its own action.<sup>70</sup>

In essence, only a reading of the Incarnation that recognizes the presence of two minds in Christ is orthodox. Morris is concerned, however, with more than merely explicating what the possession of two minds entails or looks like. He is here arguing that only his reading of the two-minds view is fully capable of mitigating the difficulties inherent in the simultaneous presence of divine and human nature in the hypostasis of the God-man. Yet the problems associated with the possession of a human body by God cannot be ameliorated by *merely* explicating the relationship between the two minds of Christ.

Morris spends considerable time and energy parsing out the relationship between the two minds in Christ, admitting, for instance, that it may be impossible to fully understand "what it is to attribute two minds, or two ranges of consciousness, to one person."<sup>71</sup> He is rightly worried about the issue, since attributing two distinct minds to Christ seems to run counter to the claim that Christ the person is a unity. He attempts to mitigate the counter-intuitive nature of his solution by invoking contemporary psychological and technological analogies. Although we cannot *know* what being a God-man with two distinct ranges of consciousness is like, we can understand how, for instance, two computer programs could be arranged such that one contained the other but was itself uncontained. We can understand because we have ourselves experienced moments of two-fold consciousness: Morris speaks of dreams where "the dreamer himself is [a character], perceiving the internal environs of the dream and taking part in its action 'from within.'" <sup>72</sup> Senor, in advocating the same solution, argues that "just as contemporary psychology suggests that much of what goes on in the human mind goes on below the conscious surface, one might suppose that taking on humanity required Christ's consciousness to be similar to ours but that below the conscious surface there existed the omniscient mind of God."<sup>73</sup>

These analogies allegedly demonstrate that the hypostasis proposed by Chalcedon, which takes Christ as possessing two wills or minds, is not contrary to reason—a move we applaud. We argue, however, that an immaterialist metaphysic offers the interpreter a way of circumventing problems that the two-minds view (at least as articulated by Morris and Senor) does not answer—and it does so in a way that also best preserves the virtues of its rival. The two-minds view, although it attempts to remove some of the difficulties that confront the traditional accounts of the hypostasis of Christ by appealing to the orthodox emphasis on two minds in Christ, does not and



cannot remove the incompatibility of divinity and materiality. Neither Morris nor Senor deny that the Son took up both a human mind and human *body*, nor do they deny that God is an immaterial being. The difficulties inherent in the simultaneous exemplification of human and divine nature remain. The two-minds view, like the kenotic alternative before it, presupposes that the relationship between the human mind and the human body is uncontroversial. If we understood the mind-body relation, then the two-minds view has considerable merit. On a materialist ontology (especially dualism), however, we simply do not understand that relation, which is precisely why Christians seriously ought to consider immaterialism. The immaterialist alternative actually makes the two-minds view *better*, since comprehending the two consciousnesses in Christ does not run afoul of blatant contradiction when the supposition of material substance is removed. The strategies utilized by Senor and Morris, though they mitigate many of the traditional difficulties with the orthodox understanding of the Incarnation, are flawed—or better yet, are incomplete—because they do not explicitly grapple with the underlying ontological issue of the substance of the God-man. Invoking an immaterialist metaphysic promises to resolve the issue of divinity and embodiment and is fully compatible with the two-minds understanding of the Incarnation.

Our immaterialist explication of the Incarnation is similar to the two-minds view posited above in that it emphasizes a second experiential aspect of the God-man. Just as Morris and Senor emphasize the Son's simultaneous possession of two distinct ranges of consciousnesses in order to salvage the coherency of orthodox formulations, we argue that he—without surrendering his divinity—voluntarily entered into a limited, *human* relationship with a series of sensible ideas. That is, the omnipercipient and omnipotent mind of God freely elected to restrict the nature and scope of the perceptions it had. Since Berkeley's metaphysic identifies God and finite minds as differing only by a matter of degree (both being immaterial mental substances), the Incarnation characterizes a voluntary restriction of a perfect mind *with regards to the physical body of Christ*. Our explication of this doctrine nowhere requires that the subject in question—the Son—relinquish the unlimited nature of his mind. Taking up a body does not entail, in our interpretation, surrendering the divine nature. The Son *elected* to perceive finite sensory ideas in the manner in which created finite minds do in order to make God (as Berkeley notes) "more visible." There is no contradiction in this description of the ontology, although *how* the Son could be fully human by doing so is still a mystery. The two-minds view cannot alone salvage the difficulties inherent in the possession of a human body by God. Our interpretation, however, explicitly removes one of the most basic difficulties in understanding the ontology of the God-man and does so in a way that preserves the requirements of orthodoxy and the explanatory force of Morris's solution.

In conclusion, immaterialism offers the Christian philosopher resources unavailable to those who posit the existence of material substance. It renders a key Christian doctrine amenable to reason without undermining that mysteriousness without which genuine faith is impossible. There is little reason to suppose the immaterialist Christian—George Berkeley being an excellent representative—less capable of upholding both letter and spirit of orthodox faith than her materialist rivals. The doctrine of the Incarnation is excellent evidence for the truth of this assertion. The immaterialist does not deny the transcendence of God or the limitations of man. He does not deny that the Son possessed a body in the same way that ordinary finite persons do, nor that he truly suffered and died. There is nothing intrinsically repugnant in our contention that God chose temporarily to alter his relationship with sensible ideas in a way that accords with the human experience of the world. In short, there is good reason to suppose that Christians should at least look hard at immaterialist ontologies to ground their faith. To overlook immaterialism is to overlook an invaluable and consistent basis for rational, conscientious Christianity.

## NOTES

- 1 PHK 156. All Berkeley citations from *The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne*, ed. A.A. Luce and T.E. Jessop, 9 vols. (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1948–57). The following abbreviations will be used for convenience: 3D: *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous*, ALC: *Alciphron; or the Minute Philosopher*, PC: *Philosophical Commentaries* (the notebooks), PHK: *Principles of Human Knowledge*, S: *Siris: A Chain of Philosophical Reflexions and Inquiries*. Other texts of Berkeley, not abbreviated, are also from this source. Section numbers will be used for the *Principles of Human Knowledge*, *Philosophical Commentaries*, and *Siris*; all others will be page numbers from the appropriate volume in the *Works*.
- 2 The one notable exception is James Spiegel, "The Theological Orthodoxy of Berkeley's Immaterialism," *Faith and Philosophy* Vol. 13 no. 2 (April 1996), pp. 216–235. Others have discussed issues that are relevant but not quite on topic. See James Danaher, "Is Berkeley's World a Divine Language?" *Modern Theology* Vol. 18 no. 3 (July 2002), pp. 361–373, and Geneviève Brykman, "Is Immaterialism a Roundabout Way to Faith?" unpublished. There is, of course, a large literature concerning such topics as Berkeley's arguments for the existence of God, but none of them engage the issue central to this paper.
- 3 By "materialist rival" we include any ontology that posits the existence of matter as a substance. Thus material monism and mind-body dualism are both materialist in this sense. As we shall subsequently note, we do not intend to engage non-modern conceptions of matter (such as Aristotle's *materia prima*).
- 4 ALC, p. 249.
- 5 3D, p. 168.
- 6 ALC, p. 327, emphasis added.
- 7 Taken from Frances M. Young, *The Making of the Creeds* (London: SCM Press, 1991), pp. 77–79.
- 8 This understanding of the Son's nature is, in technical theological terms, "Dyophysite" (in contrast to Monophysitism—the belief that the Incarnate Word possessed one ([divine] nature). Since this paper is concerned with the orthodox understanding of the Incarnation (as formulated by Chalcedon), further analysis of this terminology and the uses to which it was put lies beyond our aims here. For an excellent treatment of the distinction, see John Meyendorff, *Christ in Eastern Christian Thought* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1987).

- 9 See *Abridged Greek-English Lexicon*, edited by Henry G. Liddell and Robert Scott, (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 743.
- 10 Liddell and Scott, *Abridged Greek-English Lexicon*, p. 507.
- 11 See Meyendorff, *Christ in Eastern Christian Thought*, esp. pp. 13–46.
- 12 *The Book of Common Prayer*, standard edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1662]1968), p. 612. See also Edward Harold Browne, *An Exposition of the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion: Historical and Doctrinal* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Company, 1887), p. 66.
- 13 See, for instance, John 1:14, Psalm 2:7, Hebrews 1:5, Luke 1:35, Matthew 1:20, Matthew 1:23, Matthew 1:25, and Luke 2:7. All Scriptural references are taken from the King James Version of the Bible.
- 14 For instance, that he appeared as an angel to Abraham (Genesis 18).
- 15 ALC, p. 247.
- 16 Compare several discussions about various difficulties in Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall, and Gerald O'Collins (eds) *The Incarnation: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Incarnation of the Son of God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002). Brian Leftow, for instance, defends the plausibility of the Incarnation against charges of contradiction based on the timelessness and temporality of the Son in his essay "A Timeless God Incarnate" in that volume, pp. 273–299.
- 17 As the focus of the paper concerns the modern (i.e. in the period between Descartes and Kant) understanding of the Incarnation, we exclude concerns that arise from medieval conceptions of matter and form. One might be tempted to think that material and immaterial substances are commensurable if one is thinking in terms of Aristotelian hylomorphism, but such views are not, strictly speaking, ones that make matter a genuine substance. Once one leaves the medieval conceptions behind, matter and spirit are incommensurable.
- 18 Eleonore Stump, "Aquinas' Metaphysics of the Incarnation," in *The Incarnation*, pp. 197–218.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 208.
- 20 *Ibid.*, pp. 208–209.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 211.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 217.
- 23 PHK 11.
- 24 S 317.
- 25 S 317. Berkeley draws these characterizations directly from Aristotle. See *Metaphysics* VII, 3 (1029a20–25).
- 26 This is not to say that all Christians must endorse the view that God is pure act. Our point, however, is that God is not a passive entity upon which other entities act—a view no orthodox Christian would deny.
- 27 One might prefer an apophatic approach to understanding the divine nature. According to this strategy (endorsed by Aquinas among others), finite human minds can only understand God by saying what God is *not*. We recognize the force of this interpretive avenue but argue that the ontological concerns generated by the Incarnation are not thereby mitigated.
- 28 See John 4:24, Deuteronomy 4:15, Luke 24:39, John 1:18, John 5:37, Acts 17: 29, Romans 1:20–21, 1 Timothy 1:17, and 1 Timothy 6:16.
- 29 PHK (Preface), *Works*, p. 23.
- 30 PHK 89. Note that the terms *spirit* and *mind* are used interchangeably by Berkeley.
- 31 PHK 33.
- 32 PHK 1.
- 33 PHK 38.
- 34 PHK 7.
- 35 Berkeley produces an argument from the nature of the regularities we perceive for the conclusion that there exist other minds. Berkeley is no simple solipsist. See Lorne Falkenstein, "Berkeley's Argument for Other Minds," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* Vol. 7 no. 4 (October 1990), pp. 431–440.
- 36 3D, p. 212.
- 37 PHK 32. See also PHK 72.
- 38 For an extended defense of this claim, see Marc Hight, *Idea and Ontology* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008), pp. 177–217.

- 39 See Hight, *Idea and Ontology*, pp. 193–208 for a discussion of the publicity of Berkeleyan ideas.
- 40 Berkeley's conception of the mind of God should not be confused with (among other things) the teachings of the Church of Christ, Scientist. See, for instance, Mary Baker Eddy, *Rudimental Divine Science* (Boston, MA: published by the Trustees under the Will of Mary Baker G. Eddy, 1919), p. 4. Berkeley merely denies the existence of mind-independent material substance: he nowhere proclaims the intrinsic inferiority of the perceptible universe nor conceives of the creation as an emanation of all-encompassing Mind. The mind of God is infinite, but distinct from created minds and ideas.
- 41 "For all the notion I have of God, is obtained by reflecting on my own soul heightening its powers, and removing its imperfections. I have therefore, though not an inactive idea, yet in my self some sort of an active thinking image of the Deity." (3D, pp. 231–232) See also S 323. In PC 838 Berkeley defines God as an "unextended incorporeal Spirit" that is also omniscient.
- 42 Another key passage is ALC, p. 240, where he notes "I cannot comprehend why any one who admits the union of the soul and body should pronounce it impossible for the human nature to be united to the divine, in a manner ineffable and incomprehensible by reason." Berkeley is careful (as we note elsewhere) to emphasize both the plausibility and mysteriousness of God's actions.
- 43 Berkeley, *Works* 7, p. 79.
- 44 See ALC, p. 250, where Berkeley invokes the same analogy. There Crito says: "Can you prove it impossible that a weak or sinful man should become an instrument to the Spirit of God, for conveying His purpose to other sinners, or that divine light may not, as well as the light of the sun, shine on a foul vessel without polluting its rays?"
- 45 Hebrews 1:3.
- 46 Taken from Ronald J. Feenstra, "Reconsidering Kenotic Christology," in Ronald J. Feenstra and Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., (eds), *Trinity, Incarnation, and Atonement* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989).
- 47 *Ibid.*, p. 130.
- 48 David Crisp, *Divinity and Humanity: The Incarnation Reconsidered* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 119.
- 49 See Crisp, *Divinity and Humanity*, p. 121 and especially pp. 147–153.
- 50 *Ibid.*, p. 152.
- 51 Young, *The Making of the Creeds*, p. 20.
- 52 3D, p. 260.
- 53 PHK 84.
- 54 3D, pp. 236–237.
- 55 3D, pp. 240–241.
- 56 Brian Hebblethwaite, *The Incarnation: Collected Essays in Christology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 64.
- 57 PC 675.
- 58 3D, p. 241.
- 59 *Ibid.*
- 60 Note, for instance, the words of St. Athanasius: "But men, having turned from the contemplation of God to evil of their own devising, had come inevitably under the law of death. Instead of remaining in the state in which God had created them, they were [in] the process of becoming corrupted entirely." *On the Incarnation*, trans. and ed. by A Religious of C.S.M.V (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002), p. 29.
- 61 We want to reiterate that, although there are clear consonances with functional kenoticism here, the endorsement of an immaterial ontology does not constitute an endorsement of kenoticism. We are primarily interested in solving a difficult ontological puzzle concerning the coherence of the Chalcedonian formulation of the doctrine of the Incarnation. A sustained defense of alternative immaterialist accounts lies beyond the scope of this endeavor.
- 62 See Lynne Rudder Baker, "Need a Christian be a Mind/Body Dualist?" *Faith and Philosophy* Vol. 12 no. 4 (October 1995), pp. 489–504.
- 63 *Ibid.*, p. 501.

- 64 See Thomas D. Senior, "The Incarnation and the Trinity," in Michael J. Murray and Alvin Plantinga (eds), *Reason for the Hope Within* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), pp. 248–249.
- 65 See Thomas V. Morris, "The Metaphysics of God Incarnate," in *Trinity, Incarnation, and Atonement*, pp. 119–121.
- 66 Thomas V. Morris, *The Logic of God Incarnate* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986) pp. 102–103.
- 67 Morris, *The Logic of God Incarnate*, p. 103.
- 68 Hebrews 1:3.
- 69 Morris, "The Metaphysics of God Incarnate," p. 122.
- 70 Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom (600-1700)* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), pp. 71–72.
- 71 Morris, *The Logic of God Incarnate*, p. 104.
- 72 *Ibid.*, p. 105.
- 73 Senior, "The Incarnation and the Trinity," p. 252.