

## **“Plantinga’s Defence and His Theodicy are Incompatible”**

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According to Alvin Plantinga’s celebrated free will defence, although there are “sinless worlds” (that is, worlds in which creatures are significantly free but never go morally wrong), it isn’t within God’s power to actualize any of them. For it is entirely possible that we all suffer from transworld depravity—a curious modal/moral malady according to which if God tried to actualize a world in which we were free and always did what was right, we would in fact go wrong. That’s a possibility, says Plantinga. But then given that God has actualized a morally good world—a safe assumption on theism—it follows that evil does exist. Hence, the existence of God and the existence of evil are compatible.

More recently, Plantinga has proposed an axiological extension of this conclusion. Not only is “any world in which God exists . . . enormously more valuable than any world in which he does not exist” (Plantinga 2004, 7)—a position that has come to be known as pro-theism<sup>1</sup>—“it is [also] plausible to think,” says Plantinga, that “the best possible worlds contain Incarnation and Atonement, or at any rate Atonement, and hence also contain sin and evil” (2009, 179).<sup>2</sup> Incarnation and atonement (I&A) worlds are best. These worlds include God, sin, and evil. Thus we have the much-sought-

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<sup>1</sup> For further details on pro-theism, see Kahane (2011), as well as Kraay and Dragos (2013).

<sup>2</sup> “Or, at any rate, Atonement”: this little hedge is perhaps ill-advised. For it opens up the possibility (epistemic at least) that the best possible worlds include atonement but not incarnation. This leads to an unhappy dilemma. Since, on Plantinga’s view, an incarnation has in fact taken place, it follows either that God has created a world that might not be among the best (that is, there are better); or alternatively, the actual world is one of the best, but (for all we know) the incarnation never happened. At any rate, Plantinga finds it “hard to imagine” what a world with atonement but no incarnation would look like, and thus proposes “that we ignore those possible worlds” (2000, 10). We owe this point to Klaas Kraay.

after explanation—not simply for how evil *could* co-exist with God, but for why it is better that God *actually* permits it. What we have, then, is a rare attempt at theodicy by way of a distinctly Christian pro-theism.

In this paper, we attempt to show that if Plantinga’s defence succeeds, his theodicy fails. For if every creaturely essence suffers from transworld depravity, then given that Jesus has a creaturely essence (as we will attempt to show), it follows that I&A worlds cannot be actualized by God, in which case we have anything but a *felix culpa*.

## 1 PLANTINGA’S PRO-THEISM

According to Plantinga, when faced with the question “Why does God permit evil?”, a theist “might like to have a theodicy, an answer to the question why God permits evil” (1974a, 10). That is to say, she might like to know God’s *actual reason* for allowing evil and suffering in the world. Given our limited epistemic situation, however, that’s a pretty tall order. Thus, as we all know, Plantinga offered something rather less: a defence. What’s the difference? Here is van Inwagen’s helpful explanation:

A defense is not necessarily different from a theodicy in content. Indeed, a defense and a theodicy may well be verbally identical... The difference between a defense and a theodicy lies not in their content but in their purposes. A theodicy is a story that is told as the real truth of the matter; a defense is a story that, according to the teller, may or may not be true.

(2006, 7)

Now this feature of a defence has left some philosophers unsatisfied. For example, John Hick, while agreeing that Plantinga has resolved the logical problem of evil, finds his methodology “disquieting.” He writes: “That he should so easily fill a gap in his theodicy by appealing to a mythological idea, on the ground that it is logically possible, emphasizes again the remoteness of Plantinga’s concern from all questions of plausibility and probability” (2007, 369). Sure, it’s possible (as Plantinga says) that natural evil could be the result of the free actions of non-human agents (demons). But as J. L. Mackie notes: “whether this offers a real solution of the problem is another question” (1982, 154).

Still, this is surely unfair. *Contra* Mackie, Plantinga is, in fact, proposing a real solution to a real problem: the real problem of the (alleged) logical inconsistency between God and evil. If that is the problem, then a defence is all that’s needed. And generally speaking, the defence has met with a favourable response. According to William Rowe, “Plantinga’s argument for this conclusion is, I believe, fairly compelling” (1998, 115). No doubt thinking of Plantinga’s defence, van Inwagen concurs: “It used to be widely held that . . . no possible world contained both God and evil. So far as I am able to tell, this thesis is no longer defended” (1991, 135). This is high praise indeed.

Nevertheless, in his recent work on the problem of evil, Plantinga hasn’t been content with mere defence (even recognized, successful defence). He has been tempted to theodicy. In his paper, “Supralapsarianism, or ‘o Felix Culpa’ ” (2004) he suggests

that when God creates, he “considers all the uncountably many possible worlds, each with its own degree of excellence or value” (5). However, since there isn’t a best possible world to select (or at least no reason to think there is), God settles on the next best thing: creating “a really good possible world” (5). Of course, given the very nature of God as “perfectly good and holy, all-powerful and all-knowing” (7), it follows that “any world in which God exists is enormously more valuable than any world in which he does not exist” (7). Plantinga, then, is a pro-theist. It would be far better if God existed, he thinks, than if he did not.

Now consider all of those worlds in which God does exist. Even if we say that a world in which God exists is “in a good sense infinitely valuable” (Plantinga 2004, 8), still some are more valuable than others. In particular, there is a good-making feature that all “highly eligible worlds” have in common—

one that isn’t present in all worlds—that towers enormously above all the rest of the contingent states of affairs included in our world: the unthinkable great good of divine incarnation and atonement. Jesus Christ, the second person of the divine Trinity, incomparably good, holy, and sinless, was willing to empty himself, to take on our flesh and become incarnate, and to suffer and die so that we human beings can have life and be reconciled to the Father.

(7)

More than that, “any world with incarnation and atonement is a better world than any without it” (10). And this furnishes us with God’s actual reason for permitting evil and suffering. For God wouldn’t create anything less than a “highly eligible world,” and all such worlds

contain incarnation and atonement; hence all those worlds contain evil. So if a theodicy is an attempt to explain why God permits evil, what we have here is a theodicy—and, if I’m right, a successful theodicy.

(12)

It’s a bold and substantial claim—one that leaves the cautious but highly regarded free will defence far behind. In what follows, we argue that Plantinga cannot have it both ways. The details of the earlier defence undermine the new theodicy.

## **2 THE “DEPRAVED” DEFENCE**

At the heart of Plantinga’s defence is his much discussed notion of transworld depravity. This initially obscure concept gets unpacked in terms of *essences* (properties essentially unique to an object—e.g., *being identical with Socrates*) and *worlds* (maximal possible states of affairs). Where ‘E+’ is the instantiation of an essence E, the definition of transworld depravity (hereafter, TWD) goes as follows:

TWD: For all essences  $E$  and worlds  $W$ ,  $E$  has TWD iff  $E$  entails the world-indexed properties *is significantly free*<sup>3</sup> in  $W$  and *always does what is right* in  $W$  only if there is a state of affairs  $T$  and action  $A$  such that:

- (1)  $T(W)$  is the largest state of affairs God actualizes in  $W$ ,
- (2)  $A$  is morally significant for  $E$ 's instantiation ( $E+$ ) in  $W$

and

- (3) If God were to strongly actualize  $T(W)$ ,  $E+$  would go wrong with respect to  $A$ .<sup>4</sup>

We are first invited to consider

R: God actualizes a world containing moral good, and every essence suffers from transworld depravity.

Now according to Plantinga, R is consistent with

G: God is omnipotent, omniscient, and wholly good

and together with it implies

E: There is evil.

If he's right, this shows rather handily that G and E are logically consistent, at least if we accept the elementary modal principle  $\diamond(p \ \& \ r)$  and  $\square((p \ \& \ r) \supset q)$ ; hence  $\diamond(p \ \& \ q)$ . So perhaps there are these worlds in which everyone is significantly free and always does what is right. It by no means follows that God can actualize (even weakly actualize)<sup>5</sup> any of them. For it might be that we all suffer from Plantinga's curious transworld affliction.

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<sup>3</sup> Plantinga's account of freedom is libertarian. A person has significant freedom with respect to an action only if she could have done otherwise—that is, if it was within her power “at the time in question, to perform the action, and within [her] power to refrain.” Thus no one is free with respect to an action if she is causally (or logically) determined to take that action or refrain from it. See Plantinga (1974a, 166).

<sup>4</sup> This is Plantinga's most recent formulation of TWD (cf. 2009, 178–179). In both its early and later formulations, TWD involves quantification over *all* essences, though the use to which Plantinga puts this principle is specified to *creaturely* essences—essences, as he says, entailing the property *is created by God*. See Plantinga (1974b, 188, fn 1). We shall have more to say about the implications of this specification below.

<sup>5</sup> According to Plantinga, God weakly actualizes a state of affairs  $S$  just in case God strongly actualizes—that is, causes to be actual—“a state of affairs  $S^*$  that counterfactually implies  $S$ ” (1985b, 49).

At this juncture, Plantinga has been at pains to convince his critics that R can serve its modal purposes very nicely even if it happens to excite “incredulous stares” from the intelligentsia:

R need not be true, or probable, or plausible, or accepted by the scientists of our culture circle, or congenial to “man come of age,” or anything of the sort...R can do its job perfectly well even if it is extraordinarily improbable or known to be false.  
(1985b, 43)

To do its work, R need only be possible—a modest claim, to be sure, one befitting our meagre knowledge of what *actually* goes on with essences across worlds. Strangely enough, however, it turns out that R’s possibility is both a blessing and a curse: a blessing if the goal is to show that E is consistent with a *minimal theism* (i.e., the view that G is true); a curse if we’re aiming for consistency with something more robust—say, Christian theism and its doctrines of Incarnation and Atonement.

### 3 A “DEPRAVED” DIVINITY?

#### 3.1 A FATAL POSSIBILITY

But wherein lies the curse? R’s possibility doesn’t wear its problems on its sleeve. How does the argument go? Approximately as follows. We begin by noting that if R is possible, then so is its right conjunct—the claim that every essence suffers from transworld depravity (hereafter, TWD). So, initially, we have it that

◇TW: Possibly, all essences suffer from TWD.

Now as we all learned at our mother’s knee, a Plantingean essence is a unique sort of property—a property without which a given object could not exist, but also such that nothing else could possibly have it. So consider Socrateity—Socrates’ essence. Socrateity entails each of the properties essential to Socrates: properties we all share such as *being coloured if blue*,<sup>6</sup> but also properties essentially unique to Socrates (e.g., *being identical with Socrates*—what Plantinga calls his “thisness”<sup>7</sup>).

We should also note that essences, like numbers, propositions, and possible worlds, are abstract objects; they have a Platonic status.<sup>8</sup> They are the sorts of things that are exemplified or not.<sup>9</sup> And the thing to see is that everything whatsoever has an essence,

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<sup>6</sup> See Plantinga (1974b, 60–62).

<sup>7</sup> “Let us say that a *thisness* is the property for some object *x* (some actually existing object *x*) of being that very object *x*” (Plantinga 1985a, 335).

<sup>8</sup> See Plantinga (1985b, 88).

<sup>9</sup> See Plantinga (1974b, 70; 1985a, 335).

and that includes Jesus Christ: “the second person of the divine Trinity...[who] was willing to empty himself, to take on our flesh and become incarnate” (Plantinga 2004, 7). For ease of reference, then, let J refer to Jesus’ thisness.

The question at once arises: does J suffer from TWD? Naturally, *being depraved* is the very last thing one wants to attribute to Jesus – at least if we’re thinking of him (as Christians do) as the one who atones for human sin and wrong doing. Thus we are told:

You know that he [Jesus] appeared in order to take away sins, and in him *there is no sin*.

(1 John 3:5)

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, *yet without sin*.

(Hebrews 4:15)

As Plantinga says, “Jesus Christ...[is] incomparably good, holy, and sinless” (2004, 7). It almost goes without saying that anyone who is himself depraved stands in need of atonement, and thus cannot hope to atone “for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:2).

Still, to be fair, Plantinga never says that Jesus’ essence suffers from TWD; he only says (by implication and at best) that this is possible provided that  $\diamond TW$  is true. And in fact even that is questionable. For  $\diamond TW$  is true only if there is a world  $W^*$  in which

TW: (x) (x is an essence  $\supset$  x has TWD)

is true. But here, by all accounts, the domain of the quantifier ranges only over the set  $\psi_e(W^*)$  of essences that exist in  $W^*$ . And what TW says is that every essence contained in *that* set is such that *it* suffers from TWD. There isn’t the slightest suggestion that  $\psi_e(W^*)$  includes J. But if not, then we don’t have it that Jesus’ essence is even possibly transworld depraved, in which case J, from all appearances, appears to be happily sheltered from the atonement negating effects of TWD.

Unfortunately, however, things are not as they appear. It turns out that there are a few complications, arising from particular features of Plantinga’s modal metaphysics. Consider, for example, what he says about Socrateity:

Socrates is a contingent being; his essence, however, is not. Properties, like propositions and possible worlds, are necessary beings. If Socrates had not existed, his essence would have been unexemplified, but not non-existent.

(2003, 116–117)

Or again,

The property which is in fact the thisness of Socrates would have existed, I hold, even if Socrates hadn't—although then it wouldn't have been a thisness. If Socrates had not existed, this property would not have stood in the *is the thisness of* relation to Socrates—just as, if I had not existed, my brother-in-law would not have stood in the *is the brother-in-law* relation to me. He could nevertheless have existed even if I had not.

(1985a, 335)

So the basic idea is that essences exist necessarily; it isn't necessary for any of them to be exemplified to exist. They will exist even in worlds where they go unexemplified altogether. Accordingly,  $\psi_e(W^*)$ —the set of essences that exist in  $W^*$ —is identical with the set of all essences (whether exemplified or not).

### 3.2 INCARNATION AND ATONEMENT?

Interesting things follow. Note first that if  $J$  is an essence and if every essence exists in every world, then  $J$  will exist in  $W^*$ —a conclusion that together with the truth of  $TW$  (in  $W^*$ ) entitles us to infer that *Jesus' essence has TWD* is true in  $W^*$ . Of course, this is not to say that  $J+$ , the instantiation of  $J$  (namely, Jesus himself), is transworld depraved but only that he could be. Even so, this bare possibility rapidly leads to grief. For consider what it would be for  $J$  to suffer from TWD. Where 'A' and 'T' are as before, it is for  $J$  to possess the following property: being such that

$TWD_j$ :  $(W)((J \text{ entails } \textit{is significantly free in } W \ \& \ J \text{ entails } \textit{always does what is right in } W) \supset (\text{God strongly actualizes } T(W) > J+ \text{ goes wrong with respect to } A \text{ in } W)).^{10}$

However, if  $J$  has  $TWD_j$  in  $W^*$ , then  $J$  actually has  $TWD_j$  (by the principle  $\diamond \Box p \text{ entails } \Box p$ ). It then follows (by universal instantiation) that

$TWD_{j\alpha}$ :  $(J \text{ entails } \textit{is significantly free in } \alpha \ \& \ J \text{ entails } \textit{always does what is right in } \alpha) \supset (\text{God strongly actualizes } T(\alpha) > J+ \text{ goes wrong with respect to } A \text{ in } W).$

But given that  $J$  entails *is sinless and significantly free in  $\alpha$*  (the sole actual world), as Plantinga will presumably insist, we have the following fatal counterfactual

FATAL: God strongly actualizes  $T(\alpha) > J+$  goes wrong with respect to  $A$  in  $\alpha$ .

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<sup>10</sup> Here we use ">" to express the counterfactual connective.

Now FATAL is fatal for the simple reason that  $\alpha$  is in fact actual; and so we know that there is a largest state of affairs  $T(\alpha)$  that God has strongly actualized in weakly actualizing  $\alpha$ .<sup>11</sup> Therefore, we cannot avoid

SIN:  $J+$  goes wrong with respect to A in  $\alpha$ .

Certainly, this is no happy outcome for the Christian; for  $J+$  is the instantiation of  $J-$ —namely, Jesus himself, the incarnate son of God. How can *he* go morally wrong and yet still qualify as a perfect substitute for sin? No doubt Plantinga is right when he says

Atonement is among other things a matter of creatures' being saved from the consequences of their sin; therefore if there were no evil, there would be no sin, no consequences of sin to be saved from, and hence no atonement.

(2004, 12)

But then—at least on the standard Christian scheme—the one doing the atoning isn't supposed to have sins in need of atonement.<sup>12</sup> Yet that's precisely what is implied by  $\diamond TW$ —the lynchpin in Plantinga's defence. Hence, if God's actualising “a really good possible world” implies “he will create a world containing incarnation and atonement” (2004, 11–12), then the actual world isn't “really good.” To be sure, it contains sin and evil, as Plantinga says every “highly eligible world” does. But if SIN is true, then although it may include incarnation, the actual world lacks atonement. It doesn't rank, therefore, among the best possible worlds, Those worlds with both incarnation and atonement will be better.

That raises another question. Why didn't God choose to actualize an I&A world? Of his I&A theodicy, Plantinga remarks:

All it really requires is that among the worlds of great value, there be some that include incarnation and atonement . . . all that is really required, for my argument, is that incarnation and atonement be possible, i.e., that there be possible worlds that include them. Since, according to Christian thought, this state of affairs is actual, it is a fortiori possible.

(2004, 11)

So I&A worlds are possible and available for actualization because the actual world is an I&A world. This follows, at any rate “according to Christian thought,” though not as we've seen on  $\diamond TW$ . But let that pass. Let's stipulate that there are I&A worlds, that they

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<sup>11</sup> Our argument here presupposes “Lewis' Lemma”: “For every world  $W$  in which God exists, God could have weakly actualized  $W$  only if  $G(T(W) > W$ ” (Plantinga 1985b, 50).

<sup>12</sup> For someone like Plantinga, the alternatives here are somewhat bleak: (1) hold that Jesus atones for *our* sins, but someone else atones for *his* (say, God the Father), or (2) hold that Jesus' sins aren't in need of atonement at all. Thanks to Klaas Kraay for drawing this point to our attention.



are all “highly eligible,” better than non— I&A worlds, and that God, if he creates at all, will actualize one of them. The salient question is not whether there are such worlds, but whether Plantinga’s theodicy can make use of them. And there is reason to think not—at least if he wants to keep his defence.

Perhaps we can see this as follows. To begin with, let’s recall what it means for Jesus’ thisness to be transworld deprived:

TWD<sub>J</sub>: (W)((J entails *is significantly free in W* & J entails *always does what is right in W*)  $\supset$  (God strongly actualizes T(W) > J+ goes wrong with respect to A in W)).

Notice that the antecedent here picks out a range of worlds: those in which J+ is free and always does what is right (FAR worlds, as we might call them). Now it seems plausible to suppose that some FAR worlds will include incarnation and atonement, while others will not. Perhaps some FAR worlds involve J+ being free and always doing right (*being FAR*, for short), but there is no sin and evil. Think, for example, of a world in which *each* instantiation (of an essence) has *being FAR*. Then of course J+ will also possess that property therein. But this won’t be an I&A world, since there is no sin or evil to atone for.

The important thing to see, however, is that all I&A worlds will be FAR worlds. For if J+ either isn’t significantly free *or* doesn’t always do what is right, we don’t have atonement even if we have incarnation. If J+ doesn’t always do what is right, that is, if J+ sins, then (as we said before) we don’t have atonement. On the other hand, if J+ isn’t free with respect to any morally significant action, then it is difficult *in excelsis* to grasp how anything J+ might do related to atoning for sin could count as praiseworthy, meritorious, or acceptable to God. Indeed, if atoning for sin in any way involves being “tempted as we are” and “yet without sin,” lacking significant freedom is a serious shortcoming. For presumably, *resisting* temptation involves a free decision not to succumb to sin’s ‘gravitational pull’.

And now for the problem. If FAR worlds include all I&A worlds, then TWD<sub>J</sub> implies the following:

$\sim$ (I&A) For any I&A world W, if God were to strongly actualize T(W), then J+ (that is, Jesus—J’s instantiation) would have gone wrong with respect to A in W.

Put another way: God cannot (weakly) actualize any I&A world—not if every essence suffers from transworld depravity. For if God were to actualize such a world, Jesus would have sinned, so that some I&non-A world would have been actual. While no doubt possible in the sense of being free of contradiction, worlds containing “the towering and magnificent good of divine incarnation and atonement” (Plantinga 2004, 9), and in which “sinful creatures are offered redemption and salvation from their sins” (9–10) are simply not within God’s power to create. So we may grant (with Plantinga) that “any world with incarnation and atonement is better than any without it” (10), and also that “a necessary condition of atonement is sin and evil” (12). But how does that

explain why God actually permitted evil, if these “better” worlds can’t be actualized? Whence, then, Plantinga’s theodicy? Rather unexpectedly, it appears to falter in the face of his widely—touted defence.

## 4 OBJECTIONS AND REPLIES

### 4.1 THE CREATION OBJECTION

The doctrine of TWD is indeed possible. However, its scope doesn’t include Jesus’ essence because Plantinga tells us quite explicitly that he has only *creaturely* essences in view, “i.e., every essence entailing *is created by God*” (1974b, 188, fn 1). But Jesus’ essence, J, doesn’t entail this property, since his essence (part of it at least) is divine, namely, *being God the Son*.

Reply: It will be helpful to have before us an authoritative (or at least quasi-authoritative) account of the incarnation. Here we can scarcely do better than the *Definition of Chalcedon (451)*:

Following, then, the holy fathers, we unite in teaching all men to confess the one and only Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. This selfsame one is perfect, both in deity and also in human-ness; this selfsame one is also actually God and actually man, with a rational soul and a body. He is of the same reality as God as far as his deity is concerned and of the same reality as we ourselves as far as his human-ness is concerned, thus like us in all respects, sin only excepted.

(Leith 1963, 35–36)

For our purposes, the basic idea comes to this. Jesus is that person—God the Son, the second person of the Trinity—who, subsequent to the incarnation, has two kind essences: *being human* and *being divine*.<sup>13</sup> As the *Definition* suggests, this implies that Jesus also possessed a concrete human nature: “a rational soul and a body.” Let ‘JHN’ denote this nature. We must be careful to distinguish JHN from the abstract property of being human. The latter is an uncreated, multiply exemplifiable universal.<sup>14</sup> Every human being shares and exemplifies it. By sharp contrast, Jesus’ humanness is a *trope*—his concrete, particular instancing of this property. Naturally, JHN is distinct from your specific humanness (trope) and mine; still, as far as his humanity goes, Jesus is “of the same reality as we ourselves” (Leith 1963, 36). That is, he exemplifies the same kind essence as we do (namely, *being human*), along with everything that entails.

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<sup>13</sup> Compare Plantinga: “Jesus Christ, the second person of the divine Trinity. . . was willing . . . to take on our flesh and become incarnate” (2004, 7).

<sup>14</sup> “What God has created are the heavens and the earth and all that they contain; he has not created himself, or numbers, propositions, properties, or states of affairs: these have no beginnings” (Plantinga 1974b, 169).

## 4.1.1 Is Jesus' Essence Creaturely?

Now if that's right, we know that J—the property of being identical with Jesus—is conjunctive. It includes both *being God the Son* (GS) and *being human* (H). No one could have J without co-exemplifying GS and H. Among other things, this implies that J is a creaturely essence. It's an essence because it's a basic identity property. It's creaturely because it happily meets Plantinga's sole (sufficient) condition for being a creaturely essence: “every essence entailing *is created by God*” (1874b, 188, fn 1). Since J entails GS and H, it entails H. But it is a necessary truth (on theism) that every property instance of H (e.g., Adam's humanness, Jesus' humanness, and so on) is created by God. By the transitivity of property entailment, therefore, J entails *is created by God*. Hence, J is a creaturely essence.

The reply, of course, will be that while this line of reasoning meets the “letter of the law,” it nevertheless runs roughshod over the spirit of the original objection. The issue at stake isn't simply J's creaturely status; we can grant that if we like. Rather, what we want to know is whether J is the sort of creaturely essence featured in TWD. And here, presumably, the essences Plantinga has in mind all include or entail the property *possibly sinning* (PS). We're asked to envision the possibility of (creaturely) moral agents freely going wrong if God were to (weakly) actualize FAR worlds in which they exist. But this isn't so much as possible if creaturely essences preclude PS. For then any such essence would include the complement  $\sim$ PS of PS; that is, it would entail *not possibly sinning*.

Well then, what about J? Is its instantiation, J+, the sort of object that can make free choices about morally significant matters (e.g., deciding whether to betray a friend for thirty pieces of silver), but also go wrong along these lines—even if, in fact, it doesn't? At first glance, it is hard to see how J could entail PS. For consider, once again, J's conjuncts: GS and H. Neither of these properties, it seems, entails PS. Take GS, for example. Not only does this property not entail *possibly sinning*; it is logically incompatible with it. For the sole instantiation of GS is GS+ (that is, God the Son)—a divine person who, by the very nature of the case, is incapable of sinning. As Plantinga observes,

If, as most of the Christian tradition affirms, [God] could not have been powerless, or morally imperfect or without knowledge, then he has the complements of these properties essentially; being knowledgeable, morally perfect, and powerful will be part of his nature.

(1980, 141)

But then if the tradition is right, it's part of the nature or essence of GS+ to be morally perfect, then GS won't entail PS; it will entail its complement *not possibly sinning*.

Next consider J's other conjunct H—the property of being human. If this property entails PS, then it won't be possible for there to be an object *x* such that *x* exemplifies H but not PS. But is that really true? Consider JHN. Surely it has or exemplifies H. How, otherwise, could it be considered a concrete *human* nature? That it also exemplifies PS

is wholly unclear. For *possibly sinning* entails *being a person*, and that is precisely what JHN cannot be.<sup>15</sup> For suppose that JHN were a person. Then God the Son's becoming incarnate (that is, his taking on a human nature) would involve taking on another *person*, thereby plunging us into the Nestorian heresy; in which case (as Plantinga says in another connection) "there would be two persons here (one human and one divine) rather than the one person who is both human and divine" (2000, 319, fn 41).

#### 4.1.2 Is Jesus' Essence Conjunctive?

But then doesn't that clinch things for the objector? Neither of J's conjuncts entails *possibly sinning*; hence, even if J is a creaturely essence, it's not the sort of essence TWD has in view. Now the problem with this argument, at least in the present context, is that it relies on a questionable assumption. Where 'C' is any creaturely (conjunctive) essence and 'P' is any property, the general principle at work seems to be this:

CONJUNCT: C entails P only if there is a conjunct C\* of C such that C\* entails P.

While this principle surely holds in a wide range of cases, it is by no means clear that it always holds, or even that it would be acceptable to Plantinga. Consider, for example, God's capacity to suffer: it "exceeds ours," says Plantinga, "in the same measure as his knowledge exceeds ours" (2000, 319). In particular, "Christ's suffering was no charade" (319). His suffering was real and (at least in part) *physical* in nature; for he "endure[d] the agonies of the cross" (319).

This raises a question: how shall we handle the property *suffering physically* here? What does it get predicated of? Here one is initially inclined to think that Jesus suffered in his human nature; that is, it was JHN that experienced the physical pains associated with crucifixion. Interestingly, Plantinga considers (and promptly rejects) this possibility:

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<sup>15</sup> Objection: "You deny that JHN can exemplify *possibly sinning* on the grounds that it is a person-entailing property. But this falsely assumes that *being a person* is essential to whatever has it. It assumes that if you are a person in *any* world in which you exist, then you're a person in *every* world in which you exist. However, as Thomas Flint points out, JHN—a non-person— could have existed without being assumed by GS+, in which case JHN would have been a person in its own right—a person who, like the rest of us, was capable of moral wrongdoing." See Flint (2001, 312–318).

Reply: This reasoning is mistaken. If 'JHN' is a rigid designator, then what it refers to across worlds is the object that *as things in fact stand* (i.e., in the actual world) it does refer to. *That* object in any world it happens to exist, and just in itself, isn't going to be a person. Perhaps it could be "assumed" by *something else*, or develop into *something else* that was a person. But that isn't to the point. What 'JHN' does in fact denote won't—just on its own—be a person in other worlds.

Can we say that Christ qua human being (according to his human nature) suffered while Christ qua divine nature (according to his divine nature) did not? ... I'm inclined to think this suggestion incoherent. There is this person, the second person of the divine trinity who became incarnate. It is this person who suffers; if there really were *two* centers of consciousness here, one suffering and the other not, there would be two persons here (one human and one divine) rather than the one person who is both human and divine."

(2000, 319)

This quotation is instructive along several lines. First, it gives us a handy recipe for incarnational predication. Since the property *suffering physically* is person-entailing,<sup>16</sup> if JHN did suffer, it would have had its own "center of consciousness" and been a person in its own right. But then the incarnation would have involved two persons "rather than one person who is both human and divine."

Secondly, although Plantinga doesn't explicitly rule it out, he carefully avoids attributing *suffering physically* to Christ qua his divine nature. More precisely, he doesn't predicate it of God the Son (GS+) in isolation. Perhaps it's not hard to see why. For surely it isn't possible for someone to experience physical pain and suffering if they lack a concrete physical nature altogether. If Kripke is right, pain isn't to be *identified* with this or that physical structure or event (say, C-fibre firings). It doesn't follow that physical pain can be experienced apart from these things. Thus when we say that God the Son could have suffered physically, we don't mean this in an absolute, unqualified sense. What we mean, rather, is this. Consider the second person of the trinity united with a concrete human nature: *that* individual could have experienced what we do: physical, human suffering. Accordingly, the proper ontic subject in this case isn't GS+ *simpliciter* but rather GS+ *incarnate*: the "one person who is both human and divine."

The important thing to see here is that this gives us the makings of a counterexample to CONJUNCT. According to Plantinga, J+ can possess a property when neither GS+ nor JHN alone does. But if that is right, then surely J—a conjunctive essence—can entail a property (e.g., *possibly sinning*) even if neither GS nor H does. To be sure, CONJUNCT enjoys a certain initial plausibility, but it fails in the case that presently matters most: the incarnation. It therefore poses no insuperable problem for our claim that J is rightly thought to be among TWD's creaturely essences. Here, as we demonstrate below, it doesn't help to reply that since J is singular and unique—that is, since it (alone) among creaturely essences has *being God the Son* as a conjunct—it must be treated differently. For being thus conjoined, one might think, renders J the sole exception to CONJUNCT. In point of fact, however, this is not the case.

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<sup>16</sup> If animals also suffer physically (as it seems that they do), then they too would count as persons—not human persons, of course, but persons in their own right nonetheless.

## 4.2 THE CARTESIAN OBJECTION

On your view, there are possible worlds in which Jesus goes wrong with respect to morally significant actions. But you haven't shown this *is* possible; and in fact it isn't. For if *per impossibile* Jesus could sin, it would surely be a consequence of his having a human nature. And while, for the rest of us, that alone is sufficient for possibly sinning, not so for JHN. For the sin-inducing potentialities JHN possesses get overridden or suppressed if JHN is assumed by a divine person. But then if *being assumed by God the Son* is essential to JHN (which it is), there won't be any worlds in which Jesus sins.

There are two crucial but questionable assumptions behind our objector's reasoning here. Let's examine each in turn.

### 4.2.1 Must JHN Be Assumed by God the Son?

The first assumption has to do with JHN's existence across worlds. It may be stated as follows:

TRANSWORLD: Necessarily, for all worlds *W*, JHN exists in *W* only if GS+ assumes JHN in *W*.

According to TRANSWORLD, any world in which JHN exists is an incarnation world. More exactly, it is a world in which GS+ (and none other) has assumed JHN. Under this assumption about JHN's assumption, Jesus' human nature has the essential property *being assumed by God the Son*. Now why believe that? Why not think instead that this is a contingent property of JHN?

For this reason perhaps. If 'JHN' is functioning as a Kripkean rigid designator, then it picks out the particular and unique human nature Jesus did have across worlds. Now *that very object* just in itself is ontologically incomplete. It isn't, as we've said, a human person. Thus, Craig points out that

it is preferable to speak of the Logos's grounding, rather than assuming, a human nature, for the human nature of Christ becomes complete only in its union with the Logos.

(2006,63)

So JHN must be "grounded" or "completed" in some way. In the incarnation that grounding is provided by a divine person (the Logos or second person of the Trinity). But why think that's the only way JHN *could* be completed? Why couldn't God bring it about instead that (say) a human person—or perhaps the angel Gabriel—serves as ontological ground here? That certainly seems like something an omnipotent being could do. At any rate, nothing we know or reasonably believe about JHN precludes it.

Or take O'Connor and Woodward's recent suggestion. JHN is indeed a "stand-alone" entity, as are all instances of *being human*. It's not that something must be

supplied to JHN in order for it to exist. Not at all; JHN’s existence is in the clear. Still, human personhood emerges only after a process of development is completed and a certain threshold of complexity is achieved.<sup>17</sup> They write:

Typically, an instance of human nature will include, in itself, a proprietary center of subjectivity and agency; that is, a properly formed and functioning human body is sufficient for the emergence of an autonomous, experiencing *subject* and *agent*.  
(2015, 233)<sup>18</sup>

This is “typically” how things go. In the incarnation, however, God the Son assumes (they use the term “absorbs”) JHN prior to this complexity “threshold,” thereby preventing the emergence of a functioning human person. And this, they think, neatly avoids Nestorianism. As always, we can quibble about the details; but we shouldn’t miss the forest for the trees. If either of these proposals—“human/angel grounding” or “emergent functionalism”—is even barely logically possible, then it’s not true that (necessarily) JHN exists only if assumed by GS+. At any rate, the burden of proof here is squarely on the objector’s shoulders. She must show that these proposals are impossibilities if she wants to advance TRANSWORLD.

#### 4.2.2 Is Jesus Essentially Sinless?

There is a second critical (but questionable) assumption behind the objector’s claim that Jesus (J+) cannot go morally wrong, if his human nature (JHN) is assumed by God the Son. Here is the assumption:

SINLESS: Necessarily, for all worlds W, if GS+ assumes JHN in W, then J+ is sinless in W.

We must ask, of course, how it is that God the Son’s assuming JHN *necessitates* Jesus’ sinlessness? Proponents of SINLESS are not far to find. According to Craig, for example, “Regardless of which body the Logos chose to be united with, the body-soul composite which is the result of the Incarnation and is the individual human nature of Christ is *incapable* of sin” (2006, 63). Now so far as we can see, this way of thinking (to borrow one of Plantinga’s expressions) begins in a pious and commendable concern for Jesus’

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<sup>17</sup> Just to be clear, this is not to say that the object that is in fact Jesus’ human nature (what we’re referring to as ‘JHN’) is possibly a person. What’s possible here, rather, is only that JHN could develop into *something else*—something non-identical with what ‘JHN’ does in fact denote. What O’Connor and Woodward are saying is that *that* thing might count as a person if certain conditions are met.

<sup>18</sup> O’Connor and Woodward state their position in materialist terms. But their point is perfectly general. Dualists (like Plantinga) can also accommodate a soul-body developmental process, perhaps citing Luke 2:52 in support— “And Jesus grew in *wisdom* and stature.”

impeccability. Unfortunately, it ends by casting doubt on whether Jesus was genuinely tempted, thus calling into question the very existence of I&A worlds.

Just ask yourself: how is it meritorious or in any way atonement-securing, if Jesus fails to do what is logically impossible for him—i.e., fails to keep the moral law at any point, say, for example, by worshipping someone other than God when tempted to do so? Indeed, given SAT, Jesus cannot even *want* or *will* to sin because these, too, are morally wrong (mental) actions. Nor could he intend to want to sin. All of this, it goes without saying, bears little resemblance to his being “tempted as we are.” What would be admirable and praiseworthy is a case where Jesus could sin (where that was a real possibility for him), but then freely resisted the temptation to do so. That’s certainly the way things go with us. But if it isn’t so much as logically possible that Jesus fail to resist temptation—that is, if he is logically determined to resist it—then (on Plantinga’s scheme at least) he doesn’t do so *freely*, and so isn’t properly subject to praise and approval.

Someone might reply (following Thomas Morris) that temptation doesn’t have to involve the *logical* possibility of sinning but only its *epistemic* possibility. That is, it need only involve the agent’s not knowing he couldn’t sin even if he wanted to, while also being unaware that he couldn’t even want to. This is a subtle topic with a growing literature.<sup>19</sup> For present purposes, however, it will suffice to note the following. Morris’ prime example for showing that temptation only requires epistemic possibility actually backfires. Indeed, it actually lends support to the view he means to oppose. Here is his prime example:

On reflection, we can see that it is the *epistemic* possibility of sinning rather than a broadly logical, or metaphysical, or even physical possibility that is conceptually linked to temptation. Jones can be tempted at *t* to go and lie to his department chairman, although, unknown to him, his chairman died an hour earlier, making it impossible for Jones or anyone else to go and lie to him at *t* or thereafter.

(1986, 47)

But this example doesn’t presently serve. For one thing, the origin of the impossibility isn’t right. In Jesus’ case, the impossibility of sinning is supposed to be *de re*; it’s an impossibility said to arise from his being essentially morally good. Jesus’ identity property not only precludes

A: Possibly not doing what is morally right

it includes its negation. For if J includes A, says the objector, there will be possible worlds in which God the Son sins. And this is out of the question if, as we might think, Jesus has *being morally perfect* essentially.

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<sup>19</sup> See in particular Yandell (1988, 313–344; 1991, 169–182). See also Leftow (2014, 3–23).



In Jones' case, by contrast, the impossibility is conjunctive and circumstantial:

It is not possible that (Jones is tempted to go and lie to his department chairman & Jones' department chairman is already dead).

In other words, it's not that Jones cannot lie. No doubt he's like the rest of us. There are certain features (weaknesses or limitations) of his nature that make his telling a lie a logical possibility. Circumstances permitting, it is within Jones' power to lie. What he can't do—and this is no surprise—is lie to someone who just isn't there because they've died. But then, clearly, it's the *circumstances* that make the lying impossible here, not some *de re* truth about Jones' (concrete, human) nature.

Notice, too, that the example turns on the fact that there are some things Jones doesn't know—a fact, once again, to be ascribed to his limited nature (e.g., not being multiply located). He can be tempted because he doesn't know his department chair is already dead. If he did know this, to go and lie to him wouldn't so much as cross his mind. It wouldn't be a temptation at all. But of course there's a problem here, if we're thinking along the lines of our objector. On her view, and as “most of the Christian tradition” affirms, God's being knowledgeable is on modal par with his being morally perfect. God—and by extension God the Son—has both of these properties—and has them essentially. Now if that's right, then by our objector's logic, Jesus cannot fail to know anything, in which case we can't explain his being tempted by way of “the epistemic possibility of sinning”—that is, not knowing he cannot sin. There won't be such a possibility.

The bigger question here, however, is whether the objector is in a decent position to deny that Jesus' identity property, J, precludes A. It is far from clear that she is; indeed, precisely the opposite seems to be the case. For suppose that God's knowledge and moral perfection are on a modal par. Then recall the objector's argument against J entailing A: “If J entails A, then it is possible that God the Son sins. But this isn't possible.” Now consider this parallel (but problematic) argument. According to Plantinga, a successful doctrine of the incarnation must accommodate Jesus' not knowing some things.<sup>20</sup> “No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (Mark 12:32).<sup>21</sup> Here Jesus refers to the time of his second coming. There is, presumably, a day and hour (that is, a time) at which this event will occur. If 't' stands for that exact time, Jesus is saying he does not know the truth value of the following true proposition:

TIME: Jesus returns at t.

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<sup>20</sup> See Plantinga (1999, 184).

<sup>21</sup> Jesus' reference to himself here as “the Son” is not to God the Son, but rather (in context) “the Son of *man*” (Mark 13:26, emphasis added)—an individual with a concrete human nature.

Now let's suppose that J entails

B: Possibly not knowing TIME.

If this is so, we might argue, it is possible that God the Son lacks knowledge. But this isn't in fact possible. So J doesn't entail B. Case closed. Of course the problem is: if (following Plantinga) we take the biblical texts at face value, we know there is at least one thing Jesus doesn't know (i.e., TIME). So we know that J entails B.

But doesn't that give the objector a reason for thinking Jesus' creaturely essence does include A, thus situating it squarely within the scope of TWD's quantifier? There is a kind of parity argument here. By the objector's logic, if J doesn't entail A, then it doesn't entail B either. But it *does* entail B. Therefore, it also entails A. In any event, if as the objector concedes a concrete human nature N isn't a divine nature, then N must possess certain limiting features (e.g., having a brain with only a finite number of synapses, a body that gets hungry, tired, and so on)—features sufficient for anything that has N possibly lacking power, knowledge, and goodness. In which case, it is essential to anything with N that it have A.

But then to say that Jesus is essentially sinless amounts to saying that God has eliminated or suppressed those limiting features in JHN. This is hardly better than John Locke's once having asserted that while it is impossible for matter to think, God, being omnipotent, can nevertheless override *de re* modalities and bestow upon it the power of thinking. As the good Bishop Stillingfleet aptly observed, however, this is simply Cartesianism in disguise. The fact is: "God doth not change the essential properties of things while the things themselves remain in their own nature" (Stillingfleet 1987, 78). The application to JHN is patent.

Of course, some will be nervous here about this claim that there are worlds in which Jesus isn't impeccable. Still, for someone like Plantinga, there should be no cause for concern. We want I&A worlds because they're best. But if atonement requires being tempted by *freely* resisting sin, there must at least *be* possible worlds in which Jesus doesn't always do what is right. If there aren't, then his always choosing the good in the actual world isn't free (in Plantinga's sense) but rather logically determined. So these worlds are *there* so to speak; however, by hypothesis, they aren't I&A worlds; they're I&non-A worlds. On Plantinga's theodicy, then, God simply won't create them because they're not among the best. Rather, he'll "choose around" them (and in fact has done so) using his middle knowledge.

## 5 CONCLUSION

Plantinga is a serious, Christian pro-theist. On his view, all possible worlds are good, those in which God exists are better than those without, and the best worlds (including the one that *is* actual) all involve incarnation and atonement (and hence sin and suffering). These claims constitute the basic working parts of the theodicy—Plantinga's actual explanation for the presence of evil in the world.

But the theodicy only works if it's true that our world is an I&A world God has actualized. And we've argued it isn't, not if Plantinga's free will defence succeeds. For the defence requires that (possibly) every creaturely essence suffers from transworld depravity. Unfortunately, so far as we can see, there is no solid basis for exempting Jesus' essence from this moral misfortune. But then given various first principles in Plantinga's modal metaphysics, we have SIN—the decidedly unwanted conclusion that Jesus has *actually* gone morally wrong. And if that's right, our world is not an I&A world and the theodicy is a bust. As Christian philosophers, we can't help but think that it may well be time to re-evaluate the defence—or at least its betrothal to the doctrine of transworld depravity.<sup>22</sup>

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