

What is the aim of (contradictory) Christology?

Sean C. Ebels-Duggan

January 1, 2023

Christian theology is a prolonged stare at what *cannot be* and yet *is*. God cannot become part of creation, let alone the specific part that is a particular human being. And yet.

Part of the prolonged stare is asking *how* “the facts”—what is—can contradict “the rules”—which tell us what cannot be. The *consistentizing* strategy claims the contradiction is only apparent, arising from blind spots in our capacities to know and understand. Careful attention to these blind spots show how contradictions arise. Had we perfect vision, says this view, we see no conflict between the facts and the rules.

The development of *glutty* logics—those where propositions can be both truth and false—allows for an alternative, *contradictory* strategy which doesn’t avoid, or explain away, contradictions. This view, exemplified in this essay by Jc Beall’s “contradictory Christology” [4], affirms certain contradictions as the best account of the confounding reality within our vision. Our reluctance to accept these contradictions stems from unspoken *logical*, rather than *theological*, dogma equating contradiction with absurdity. Jettison the dogma, and one can accept, without qualification, what apparently follows from the assertions of the ecumenical councils: that the individual, Christ, has the essential properties of both human and divine natures. As such:

1. Christ is human; therefore Christ is mutable.
2. Christ is divine; therefore Christ is immutable.

The result is apparent, and real, contradiction, but not absurdity. It is simply the jarring fact that contrary properties apply to that single, confounding

individual, the Christ, the son of God, the son of Mary. Accept the contradictions, and you get “the full truth, contradictory as it is” [4, p. 50], without the jiggery-pokery that comes with explaining them away. Call this argument the Full Truth Argument (FTA).

I think the matter is a lot more complicated. To explain why, I’ll first lay out the FTA in greater detail (§1). Section 2 observes that theories can be equally *true* but unequally preferable—in the sciences, this often is because one confers a kind of understanding the other does not.

Of course, the Incarnation is a mystery. But maybe a Christology should deliver understanding *modulo* blind spots. Section 3 presents a “hidden variable” model that aims to elaborate this. And so we get an argument, supported by some logical considerations (§4), that contradictory Christology cannot support this kind of understanding.

But the tables turn in §5. Conciliar Christology’s main goals were not understanding, but *devotional* truths that enable a certain relationship with God. That is the rod for measuring contradictory Christology. So measured, things are not much better. Glutty logics undermine the task of conciliar pronouncements (§6), and the same features inhibiting understanding in Christology also inhibit devotional advances (§7).

Still, my judgment is not all negative. I’m skeptical the contradictory strategy will advance Christology’s goals, but I could be wrong—and it can play a role in a somewhat different approach to mystery that I suggest in §8.

1 The Full Truth Argument

The Full Truth Argument starts by saying that contradictions are not absurd. This may seem shocking, since contradictions are, it is thought, incapable of truth. This untutored view gets support from *classical* logic, according to which *everything follows from a contradiction*. As such, any theory that holds a contradiction to be true is trivial—every sentence is included in it. And to believe such a trivial theory is indeed to believe absurdly.

But there are *paraconsistent* logics where contradictions *don’t* trivialize theories. Indeed, the one favored by Beall, First Degree Entailment (FDE), is easy to construct. As in classical logic, there are two truth-*values*. In classical logic sentences take exactly one truth-value. However, logic should accommodate all possibilities, which include sentences having *both* truth-

values (gluts), or *neither* (gaps).¹ Add this adjustment to the usual rules of classical logic, and one gets FDE. And now *not* everything follows from a contradiction. If p is a glut and an unrelated q just false, then $p \wedge \neg p$ is true (and false) while q isn't true. So q doesn't follow from $p \wedge \neg p$.

So *logic* doesn't require that contradictions are absurd. Instead, we determine certain propositions to be absurd for topic-specific reasons: a contradiction in theology is absurd if it is absurd for theological (not logical) reasons. And these are discovered rationally in the course of theological inquiry, just as we determine the chemical absurdities in the course of doing chemistry.

For Beall, the situation in Christology is this: we have, through revelation and the Spirit's guidance of the ecumenical councils, an account of Christ which appears to entail that contradictory properties hold of him. Consistentizing efforts have had a long run with little success, introducing baroque metaphysical constructions with concepts foreign to the revelation recorded in the New Testament. The contradictory strategy, by contrast, allows full acceptance of everything entailed (on the simplest understanding) by the conciliar statements (no metaphysics required!). Christ has two natures, such that "the property of each nature is preserved and concurs together into one person and *hypostasis*"—even those that contradict those of the other nature. The simplest reading of the Chalcedonian Definition holds that Christ has contradictory properties. So the benefit of the contradictory strategy is that we can accept all the extraordinary truths concerning the extraordinary reality of the incarnation.

By my lights, the project of giving the full truth of reality – in this case, the full theological truth – is the goal... Given that reality itself is contradictory – that there is a contradictory being in reality – the true account of reality is itself contradictory, and thereby false in addition to being true. ... I suggest that we... accept the full truth, contradictory as it is. [4, p. 49-50]

This, of course, is the argument of one already convinced: to those unconvinced, the "because the reality is contradictory" reasoning simply begs the question. I'm not out to call the argument nasty names, just to make its form clear: it is an argument for conversion, and not a bad one as such arguments go. "Ye wearied and heavy-laden, how your burden would ease on the contradictory strategy! Come see in a new way: accepting contradictions will be no concession, but a celebration of the mind-exceeding God!"

¹This is a moment for protest, though not the one I will raise here.

2 Truth isn't everything

Examination of the FTA highlights the dependence of truth *in a theory* on the *framing* of that theory. Classical logic admits no contradictions, so a Christology set therein admits none also. Contradictory Christology has no such limit—and to Beall's mind, this is an advantage.

More generally, the available truths in a theory of X vary with what I'm calling the theory's framing—the language and the logic used to make statements concerning X . Consider this toy *classical framing* for color: use classical logic, and omit words for shades between blue and purple. Accordingly, for every x on the blue-purple spectrum, “ x is blue or x is not blue” is true while “ x is blue and x is not blue” is not. But on a *gappy* framing for the same language, “ x is blue or x is not blue” will not be a truth when “ x is blue” has no truth-value. On a *glutty* framing, “ x is blue and x is not blue” will be true when “ x is blue” is both true and false. And if instead the language includes “indigo” for colors between blue and purple, then in this *enhanced classical* framing, some x s will feature in truths not immediately available in the original language, such as “ x is indigo”.

These toy frames are too simple for good theorizing about color, but they point to an ambiguity in “the full truth concerning X ”. The enhanced framing can access truths about indigo, invisible to its unenhanced progenitors. So the former tells a “fuller” truth, in the sense of “more complete”.

But there are other ways to think about “full truth”. Consider two framings of biological evolution, both set in classical logic. The *coarse* account describes species, their distinguishing characteristics, and the relation between them, *descends from*. It suffices for a complete family tree of Galapagos finches, characterizing species and their morphological differences: for example, that the woodpecker finch, large with a long beak, descends from the smaller, short-beaked primordial Galapagos finch. This family tree is the full truth *in that framing*: no truth of descent is omitted.

And yet, *something* is missing. Simply having the family tree does not tell us *how* morphologically diverse species could descend from a single, uniform species. Darwin's genius was to give a *finer* framing, with language adequate to describe natural selection processes: how variation within a single population can give rise to varied distinct populations. It enables us to tell the “full truth” in a different sense: it states the facts of descent, *and* confers *understanding* where the coarse account leaves only unstatable puzzles.

What makes truth in the fine account “fuller”? Here the question gets

hard. There are answers we can give referencing “reality”: the fine account describes *more of*, or *corresponds more closely to*, or *better represents*, the reality of finch-descent. These, however, assume a notoriously opaque notion of correspondence between *truths* and *reality*. Correspondence might be *what it is* for a theory to capture the full reality, but we can’t use in evaluating our theories.² We can evaluate theories only by their accessible features. The accessible feature distinguishing the fine account is: it enables greater *understanding* of the phenomena. Its language tracks specific features, and articulates difference-making relations between those features. This articulation is what imparts understanding: the mystery of how “descent” can obtain between different species is solved by discerning how traits confer survival advantages in dynamic environments. So the fine account give a fuller truth, even though the coarse account gives us the full truth *for its framing*.

In this case theory choice relies on a factor besides completeness. But why this factor, understanding? I have no worked out account, but it seems enough for our purposes to observe that it has something to do with the goals of the inquiry involved. The fine account is preferable because it achieves a goal of scientific inquiry—enabling a certain kind of understanding.

A similar observation can be made regarding color predicates. We do fairly well with the usual language of ROY G BIV hues for our typical needs: avoiding poisonous snakes (“Red on yellow can kill a fellow”), or identifying friends in a crowd (“I’m wearing a blue-green jacket”). But for other purposes, the fuller, better, truths make finer discriminations: to determine chemical composition from light spectra, we need to discriminate very finely between blue-green shades. Here in fact we distinguish color as finely as possible: by correlating it with wavelength.

All of this is to say that it is far from clear that contradictory Christology’s “full truth” is suitable to the inquiry’s goals. Understanding was the goal in the *ordinary* case of natural selection, where we explain a mystery (descent and species variation) in terms of something (relatively) well-understood (traits and advantage). But what are the goals when we are asking about the *extraordinary*?

²This is, of necessity, a grossly oversimplified dismissal of the correspondence question.

3 Understanding and mystery

“Well-understood” the incarnation is not. Nor should it be. It is mystery to power of mystery: a transcendent God of inscrutable ways initiates a saving intervention in our history. It joins the seemingly opposite divine and human natures in a single individual, who must live without sin, endure a cruel execution, and reclaim his life from the clutches of death. The *hows* and the *whys* are baffling. The *who* is more baffling still.

Were it not for this cloud of unknowing, one would be tempted to criticize contradictory Christology because it fails to give full, understanding-imparting truth in the way Darwinian theory does. This, of course, would be to expect that all inquiries have the same goals.

This section addresses an attenuated version of this expectation. It suggests that Christological inquiry *is* like scientific inquiry: in both cases our aim is *as much understanding as possible*. The difference is that in theology, less is possible. Obscure elements are left as blank boxes, with the space around them filled in full detail.

To see how this might work, consider another example where a paradoxical opposition is realized. Exoplanet GJ436b is a “hot ice” world. Its surface temperature exceeds 800K, well higher than the 373K boiling-point for water. And yet the water on its surface is solid. So we might say: its surface is both boiling and freezing. This has an air of paradox, because boiling and freezing seem incompatible: water vapor (the result of boiling) is on the opposite end of the states-of-matter spectrum from ice (the result of freezing).

The mystery unravels with high-school science and a helpful diagram. The typical use of “boiling” and “freezing” concern the states of water *under ordinary, terrestrial conditions*—at the surface of earth. Under these conditions, indeed, water cannot assume a solid state above 373K. But, high-school science: the states of matter are a function of temperature *and a second variable*, atmospheric pressure. Worlds both *boiling* and *freezing* are mysterious because these ordinary concepts suppress the atmospheric pressure variable. We ignore pressure because matters to experience only in exceptional cases (e.g., high altitude cooking). Omitting this variable creates the apparent paradox. Attending to it, we can look up a helpful phase diagram,³ which shows that water can be solid at >800K if under pressure hundreds of thousands of times that of earth.

³[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Water_\(data_page\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Water_(data_page)).

Now imagine we lacked the very concept of atmospheric pressure, and nothing in our experience suggested that phase depends on a variable besides temperature (e.g., we've never tried cooking on a mountain top). Then the natural way to accept the tale of GJ436b would be to posit a hidden variable, to hypothesize something else at play. Our concepts of freezing and boiling *are* opposites *under terrestrial conditions*. But we overlook a condition (perhaps, we reason, because it is stable on earth) that, when varied, affects the phase of H₂O. So we come upon the truth that the phase of water is a function of two variables, but one of the variables is unknown to us.

We can apply the same thinking to the claims of the incarnation. What characterizes humanity? In part: mutability. The content of this attribution is conditioned by our experience of ourselves. What is God like? Not like us, not in our mutability. Under ordinary conditions, negation suits to characterize what is not like us in our mutability. And so we apply to God the concept of immutability.⁴ But so much about God is unknown and unknowable; we cannot assume our concepts apply as in the ordinary circumstances to which our minds are suited. Recognize the hidden variable and one might see the incompatibility, of *how we are* and *how God is*, depends on holding that variable constant at the ordinary. Like atmospheric pressure in the above bit of make-believe, it is a variable we haven't the means to understand or access.

4 Inferential inertness

If this is how Christological inquiry should go, then we can complain: "Theories should give us articulating understanding up to our point of ignorance. Ignorance of atmospheric pressure should not keep us from studying the phases of water and its relation to temperature, and it would be an advance in understanding if hot ice worlds showed us we are missing something. Just so with Christology."⁵ We say all that we can, carefully, about, e.g., mutabil-

⁴This, of course, brackets concerns about whether we can make any positive attributions to God. Hidden variable thinking appears to accommodate this; the argument would be that to say God is immutable is simply to say that he *not* mutable *in the way we are*. I'm leaving these complications aside because I ultimately don't think the hidden variable model is effective, for reasons given in in §5.

⁵One might object to the analogy, since *mutability* for humanity and *immutability* for divinity are *essential* properties, while *boiling* and *freezing* are superficial. Perhaps then the analogy fails as essential properties admit less epistemic slack than superficial ones. I'll put this question aside, since I don't endorse the hidden variable model in the end.

ity and immutability. Conceptual limitations make contradictions inevitable, but accepting them gets us nowhere towards understanding. Inquiry instead demands refining our concepts, and locating hidden variables.”

I don’t endorse this complaint, but there are logical considerations favoring some of its thinking. In the context of (propositional) FDE,⁶ we may distinguish *ordinary* from *extraordinary* propositions. As in classical propositional logic, every proposition in FDE has a (functional) equivalent in *disjunctive normal form* (DNF): a disjunction of conjunctions of sentence letters and sentence letter negations.⁷ In FDE, of course, contradictions can appear non-trivially in the DNFs of propositions. We’ll say that extraordinary propositions are those in which contradictions appear in *all* of their DNFs; ordinary propositions have only DNFs lacking contradictions. Thus, $(p \wedge \neg p \wedge q) \vee (q \wedge \neg q \wedge p)$ is extraordinary, while $(p \wedge \neg q) \vee \neg r$ is ordinary.

Supporting the complaint is the fact that extraordinary propositions are *inferentially inert*. This means: if an extraordinary proposition entails (in FDE) an ordinary one, the contradictions in the former didn’t “do any work” in requiring the latter. The contradiction, as it were, was extraneous.

More technically and accurately, what we have is an interpolation result: If $\phi \vdash_{\text{FDE}} \psi$ with ϕ extraordinary and ψ ordinary, then there is an ordinary ϕ' containing all the sentence-letters of ϕ that interpolates between ϕ and ψ : $\phi \vdash_{\text{FDE}} \phi' \vdash \psi$.⁸ The ordinary interpolant ϕ' is the non-contradictory

⁶These results hold for simple logics like FDE; it is unclear to what extent they hold for more complex paraconsistent logics, (for example, the dual of intuitionistic logic).

⁷Two sentences are *inferentially* equivalent if each is a consequence of the other, and *functionally* equivalent if their truth-table columns are identical. These are coextensive in classical logic, but distinct in FDE. In FDE every sentence has a *functional* equivalent in DNF. The proof, however, is the same for both logics, though in the latter contradictions and sentences of the form $p \vee \neg p$ are not eliminated. The proofs rely on facts common to classical logic and FDE: double negations, DeMorgan alternates, and distributions of conjunctions over disjunctions preserve functional equivalence. A thorough (syntactic) proof for the classical case can be found in [9, section 3.3]; its adaptation to FDE would also require altering Lemma 2.2 to concern substitution of functional equivalents.

⁸Proof sketch: With $\phi \vdash_{\text{FDE}} \psi$, form the DNF *in FDE* of each, call them ϕ_{DNF} and ψ_{DNF} . Now ϕ_{DNF} is of the form $D_1 \vee \dots \vee D_n$, with each D_i a conjunction of what we will call *literals*: sentence-letters and negations of sentence-letters. Without loss of generality we may assume ϕ_{DNF} is in *reduced* form: if X and Y are disjoint proper subsets of $\{D_1, \dots, D_n\}$, $\bigvee X \not\vdash_{\text{FDE}} \bigvee Y$. (Every formula has an inferentially equivalent formula in reduced DNF, since in general if $\theta \vdash_{\text{FDE}} \theta'$ then $\theta \vee \theta' \dashv\vdash_{\text{FDE}} \theta'$.) Thus, for each i there is an evaluation e_i making exactly D_i true. Thus, since $\phi \vdash_{\text{FDE}} \psi$, for each disjunct D_i of ϕ_{DNF} , there will be disjuncts D_i^1, \dots, D_i^k of ψ_{DNF} , each of which is a

proposition doing “the work” of ensuring the truth of ψ . So while contradictory propositions entail both ordinary and extraordinary propositions, their contradictoriness is essential only to their extraordinary consequences. The ordinary consequences aren’t making use of the contradiction.

Take, for an example, a very simple entailment from a contradiction:

$$3. ((p \vee q) \wedge r) \wedge \neg((p \vee q) \wedge r) \vdash_{\text{FDE}} \neg q \vee r$$

Here we have an extraordinary proposition—a contradiction, in fact—entailing the ordinary proposition $\neg q \vee r$. One of the interpolants that can be obtained⁹ is $(\neg p \wedge \neg q \wedge r) \vee (p \wedge r) \vee (q \wedge r)$, which is equivalent in FDE to $(\neg p \wedge \neg q \wedge r) \vee ((p \vee q) \wedge r)$. Notice this is the disjunction of two ordinary propositions, each a consequence of one of the conjuncts in the contradiction.

As in this trite example, in general we aren’t making use of the full contradiction. Even if the extraordinary proposition is exceedingly complex, we never use the full contradiction to get the entailed ordinary proposition—even if we iterate by drawing conclusions from prior conclusions.

This at least suggests that contradictions cannot impart understanding as described above. Understanding on this model involves moving from the relatively mysterious to the relatively well-articulated. The interpolation result suggests this can’t be done. We would hope that the mysterious—the contradiction that is the incarnation—could be articulated with well-understood ordinary propositions. But to the extent that we can get ordinary consequences, none are essentially tied to the extraordinary premises. So it looks like there can’t be the kind of articulation we would hope for.

Much more can be said on this, and admittedly, the foregoing all depends on insinuations that can be challenged: the connections between extraordinariness and mystery, and between ordinariness and articulation, to name just two. I find this criticism neither irresistible nor devoid of merit.

There is an added dimension worth mentioning. Contradictions seem to be inferential dead ends—quite unlike Frege’s hope for definitions, that they contain conclusions “as plants are contained in their seeds” [16, §88].

conjunction of a subset of literals appearing in D_i . To form the interpolant ϕ' : for each D_i^j and each sentence letter p , if exactly one of p and $\neg p$ appears in D_i , conjoin it to D_i^j and call the result $(D_i^j)^+$. If both p and $\neg p$ appear in D_i and neither appears in D_i^j , pick one of them (it doesn’t matter which) and conjoin it to $(D_i^j)^+$; call the result $(D_i^j)^{++}$. Finally, disjoin all of the resulting conjunctions to get our ordinary interpolant ϕ' , which is $\bigvee_{i=1}^n (\bigvee_{j=1}^k (D_i^j)^{++})$.

⁹As in the proof (see footnote 8), and clearing redundancies.

We are urged simply to accept the contradictions, and not to treat them as putting pressure on the concepts involved. If we don't need to explain the contradiction, and can't elucidate it, they appear not to further inquiry. It seems, additionally, that the contradictions appear at exactly the blind spots predicted by a consistentizing strategy.

But maybe most of this is beside the point.

5 The goals of Christology

The foregoing presumes the goal of Christology is understanding, and concedes that it must work with a “hidden variable” model. But even with logical support, something is amiss: the hidden variable model makes our limitations too local. God is the transcendent creator, and so is utterly unlike us or anything we encounter. So there is trouble in saying that *any* of our concepts apply to God so as to deliver scientific-type understanding, because *all* our concepts are attuned to the ordinary, which God is certainly not.¹⁰

This little argument is hardly conclusive as given, but it motivates looking elsewhere for ways to evaluate contradictory Christology. So far we've seen that the goals of an inquiry affect how its theories should be evaluated. Because theology is an inquiry into mystery, there are reasons not to measure contradictory Christology by the yardstick of natural science. The goal of natural science—to speak exceedingly broadly—is to understand the natural world via articulation, so as to formulate lawlike principles that predict and explain the empirical phenomena. This seems a mischaracterization applied to theology. We aren't seeking the laws of God's behavior or intentions, nor can we understand him by articulating the relations within his mind. “Laws” governing behavior are imperfect enough when applied to human persons. This is true as well of the conciliar theologians, whose work was not in the service of a science of God, as we know science:

The impression that the theologians of the fourth century. . . were attempting to rationalize away the mysteries of God is also completely mistaken. In fact, they were trying to protect the mystery of the gospel and the God of the gospel from false rationalization.

¹⁰Cotnoir raises a similar concern, but draws a slightly different lesson: we should not presume that “the correct consequence relation for human theorising about God is the consequence relation that God uses in his own mental life.” [11, p. 521].

... [The heretics] were attempting to make Christian belief ... too intelligible to human intellect ... Exactly how [the Trinity] could be is not fully intelligible to human minds, and heresies reduced the mystery to something mundane and comprehensible and in the process robbed it of its majesty and glory. (Olson, p. 174)

(Further, their vigor in enforcing or condemning certain formulations seems excessive if the goal were to unfurl theories of God's action that are like theories of how a watch tells time.)

So what is Christology for? Much more than I can say. But one concern of the councils was to ensure proper communication of Christ's work and its bearing on our salvation. It was important to the Church to discern and indicate both correct and misleading conclusions concerning believers' salvation and the God they worship. Their work was thus the declaration of dogma with the narrative of salvation as a guide;¹¹ working out an *understanding* of the doctrines, but not "understanding" as an articulation of *underlying structure*, as in the sciences. It is an articulation of what God's action—documented in the Gospels—had to *be* in order to secure our redemption. The life, death, and resurrection of the Nazarene preacher Jesus, his relation to the person he called "my Father", and to the Spirit he sent to guide and animate the community of his followers, according to the Epistles, established the path to salvation. Trying to understand this, and what we are to do in light of it, depends on who these Persons are, and how God's actions (completed and ongoing) bear on our salvation.

This explains, to some degree, why doctrine was so important in the conciliar period. Christ's work was the salvation of the world. In it we are invited to a life of contemplating and recognizing (at least in part) God's work on our behalf. What we believe affects what constitutes that life.

This attitude appears in Athanasius's treatment of the Trinity. Why can faith through false doctrine leave one "without God, worse than an unbeliever, and anything rather than a Christian" (Epistle to Serapion I.30)?¹² Because such *belief* negatively alters one's relation to God.

Consider a more mundane example. If I *believe* my trustworthy friend is trustworthy, then belief and fact jointly constitute a relation between us: *deserved trust*. But if I distrust her, belief and fact constitute a different

¹¹This was, of course, only one guiding light: there were other theological motivations, as well as countless regrettable political intrigues.

¹²Quotations are from [3].

relation: *misplaced trust*. How beliefs relate to facts affect the nature of the relationship. Different things are true of us taken together, and the things we can do and be, together, are different.

Particular false doctrines affect the divine-human relation in particular ways: one who believes in the Spirit as a creature, for example, has “not that which is ‘in all’”; consequently lacks hope for being united to God [3, I.29].¹³ Out hope in God is one part of our relation to him. The *nature of* our hope depends on what we believe about *that in which* we hope.

Similar reasoning is found throughout the letter,¹⁴ with Athanasius reasoning from what *God’s saving relation to us must be* to what *God must be like* in effecting that salvation. Pettersen summarizes the overall outlook:

Athanasius’ concern is not just right beliefs. His concern includes right beliefs, but also *right relationships*. . . . what is at stake is not just a theological theory but people’s salvation. [25, p. 187]

That there is one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is not mere academic matter, but that which *permits and enables* a person’s living a godly life. [25, p. 189]¹⁵

Having certain relationships with God, and being able to live in certain ways, depend (to some degree) on having certain attitudes concerning God’s action and nature.¹⁶ Distortions of Christ’s person and work (or of the Trinity) can distort our relationship to God. They can make our worship idolatrous, and our discipleship perverse. What we believe *about* the incarnation affects our devotional attitudes *towards* the Incarnate Lord, and those attitudes are (partly) determinative of the relationship we have with him.

¹³I’m of course eliding the role *deification* plays in salvation in conciliar thought, and in Eastern Christianity more generally.

¹⁴Another good example [3, I.30] concerns the bearing of Trinitarian belief on faith and the baptismal rite: It is “faith in the Triad”—God *as* three-in-one—that “joins us to God”; heterodox rites are thus “ineffective”. See also Shapland’s footnote 2 [3, p. 139].

¹⁵Olson likewise remarks in explaining Athanasius’s stubbornness: ‘confessing [heresy] means “rejecting our own salvation and teaching a false gospel.” [22, p. 172] Similarly, the concern motivating the Council of Chalcedon was “to explain as far as possible for human minds what Christians mean when they confess the man Jesus to be both God and human at the same time *in order to protect the gospel of salvation*” [22, p. 199].

¹⁶So did the relationship of Christians before the conciliar creeds suffer because of this? Not necessarily. The claim is that understanding the work in certain ways enables certain relationships, and that understanding the work in other ways inhibits those relationships. It doesn’t mean that those relationships can only be had by such understandings.

Athanasius is hardly unique in this; the connection between the confessional and the relational is ubiquitous in discussions of right doctrine.¹⁷ Or so it seems to my haphazard and very amateur eye. Granted, it is a vexed question how accurate our theology must be to enable a Christian life, or a relationship with God more generally; I rather suspect Athanasius would find my own thinking too lax. But my point is that theological inquiry is directed towards something besides scientific understanding. It is successful when it enables certain relations with the author of our salvation.

If this is right, then the Full Truth Argument distorts the choice we face. It isn't merely that one should be persuaded of Christological strategy because its elegant means to many truths. Were Christology a science, we would also want understanding. It isn't a science, it's theology: so we want it to influence, vitalize, and deepen our practice of the Christian life.

The contradictory strategy shouldn't be evaluated only on the truths it enable us to affirm. It should be judged by what affirming those truths enables. So how well does the contradictory strategy fares along this axis?

6 FDE is not dogmatic (and why that's bad)

We've seen now that Christology can be done to enable certain kinds of relationships with God. How was this done by the councils? By formulating doctrines to *include* certain claims about the incarnation, and to *exclude* others. Theology's dogmatic pronouncements aim to keep our beliefs from disrupting the relationships in which we stand with God.

The contradictory strategy, at least as implemented by Beall, has difficulty accounting for how Christology could guide belief away from error. This is because of a peculiar feature of FDE, the logic Beall favors.

Let T be the True Christology—it will be the set of true sentences in the language L of Christology. If Beall is right, we should think of the *logic* of L —and of everything—as FDE. Now T may contain contradictions, but

¹⁷The thread of thought seems to go back at least to the first epistle of John. Practical concerns predominate for three chapters until the practical and creedal converge at verse 3:24. The assurance of God's presence (a practical matter) is manifest by a spirit *confessing* "that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh". Only those who know God—who can exhibit Christian love—accept the testimony to the incarnation (4:5–6); indeed, "God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God" (4:15 NRSV (Updated Edition)). The right confession is coextensive with the possibility of God's abiding presence (as well as "abiding in love" (4:16b)).

as Beall notes, this doesn't mean that *every* sentence is in T : “Christ is immutable” and “Christ is mutable” are in T , and so is “Christ is not two persons”, but “Christ is two persons” is not. The sentences excluded from T —those not true—are excluded not by logic but by theology.¹⁸

But here is the odd thing. For any non-trivial theory, in FDE we can add the negations of arbitrarily many propositions of that theory without, in general, trivializing the theory.¹⁹ In our example, we can add “Christ is two persons” to T (which already contains its negation) without trivializing the resulting theory, T' . The upshot: propositions can be ruled *in* to an FDE-theory, but nothing can be ruled *out*. At least not by logic.

Now give ear to the contradictory Christologist: “So what? I've been saying all along: it isn't *logic* that rules out Christ being two persons. It's

¹⁸It is a fair question how this works. Beall has made several non-committal suggestions (see [4, §4.1.4]); the one that seems most compelling is that topic-specific reasoning is the process of making choices between contradictions. For whatever the topic, if q is a topic-specific consequence of p , then $q \vee (p \wedge \neg p)$ is a *logical* consequence of p . So when we infer q from p in our topic-specific way, we are in effect choosing, for topical reasons, to accept q rather than the contradiction $p \wedge \neg p$.

¹⁹Meaning, in a reasonably robust theory, there will be sentences $\neg p$ in T such T plus p is non-trivial. There are, of course, exceptions: if our (propositional) language L contains just p , and T contains just the consequences of $\neg p$ in L , then naturally adding p will trivialize T . But this does not happen in general. The result can be proved in several (tedious) ways, but why it is so is demonstrated by example. Take the ordinary proposition from (3) above, $(p \wedge q) \vee r$. Each line of a truth table starts with an evaluation—assignment of truth-values to sentence-letters—and proceeds to compute the truth-values of more complex sentences. Listed below is one of the five classical evaluations on which (3) is true:

p	q	r	$p \wedge \neg q$	$\neg r$	$(p \wedge \neg q) \vee \neg r$
t	t	f	f	t	t

However, we can add the opposite truth-value to any entry in the left three columns without making the right-most entry *untrue*, for the status either remains having only the value t , or changes to having both truth-values. Here are just three such alterations:

p	q	r	$p \wedge \neg q$	$\neg r$	$(p \wedge \neg q) \vee \neg r$
t	t	t, f	f	t, f	t, f
t	t, f	t, f	t, f	t, f	t, f
t, f	t	f	f	t	t

By adding the other truth-value, we never lose truth in the right column (though we might add falsehood). To ensure that the expanded theory isn't trivialized, we simply avoid adding the extra truth-value to *all* letters in L .

theology.” But here’s the catch: how are the conciliar theologians to *communicate* that “Christ is two persons” should not be a part of T ? They can’t accomplish this by including its negation in T . Perhaps they expect us to compare T and T' , and see the theological reasons favoring the former. But the point of their pronouncements is to tell us which theories are acceptable *according* to theological reasoning. It is hard to see how this dogmatic task could be accomplished with FDE as the background logic. The creeds can insist up and down that Christ is not two persons. We might still not get the theological memo, adding that Christ also *is* two persons. Perhaps then the theologians should just beat us with sticks.²⁰

7 Inertness again

A more acute worry, though, is that the problem of inertness arises again. How are our devotional goals fostered by a contradictory Christology? Beall’s remarks suggest *selective focus*:

In practice, Christians often find times when they rely on the truth of Christ’s divine properties while resting on the falsity of Christ’s human properties; and at other times Christians rely on the falsity of Christ’s divine properties while resting on the truth of Christ’s human properties.²¹ [4, p. 46]

In living out their faith, Christians alternate between parts of the contradictions. When one needs assurance that our intercessor will not abandon us and will not fail, we put on the divine-tinted glasses, that allow focus on Christ’s immutability. When we need to identify Christ’s suffering with ours, or need to emphasize that Christ’s relationship is as a brother or a lover, put on the human-tinted glasses, and focus on his mutability.

²⁰This is somewhat related to Meghan Page’s concern [24] that because FDE has no detachable conditional (a connective \rightarrow such that $p, p \rightarrow q \vdash_{\text{FDE}} q$) we are hobbled in our theological reasoning. Beall replies that detachable conditionals aren’t excluded from the full story of Christ [4, §4.1.4.2–3], they just don’t appear where they would cause trouble. The concern paralleling the one given here is how to distinguish the uses of differing conditionals and consequence relations. I expect Beall will say this done, as always, by the hard work of topic-specific inquiry. These are questions for another time, but I think all sides face a hard road explaining how inquiry can discern these things.

²¹Beall’s remark is not made directly towards the devotional question, but it applies here without distortion.

More generally: whether in belief or developing our devotion, we don't embrace the whole contradictory theory, but, rather, judiciously chosen consistent fragments of it in order to move forward. The uncharitable way to view this is that we alternate between two theologies that proceed in parallel, with no interaction. This isn't promising for orthodox theology, whatever its goal.²² The more charitable reading is that we can get some devotional mileage from the contradiction via the “chunk and permeate” model advocated by Priest and others.²³ Learn A from one consistent fragment F , now add A consistently to another consistent fragment G (which is *inconsistent* with F) to get B . Now permeate B elsewhere to get more conclusions and insights we could not get from any consistent part.

And this brings us back to the inertness of contradictions in propositional FDE: no matter what fragments you use to obtain a non-contradictory insight, the sum of those fragments will be consistent. So even if one takes the alternating strategy, one still isn't using the contradictions.

One could respond—in both cases—that while contradictions are *logically inert*, they aren't *topically inert*: topic-specific consequence relations could escape the interpolation result without trivializing their theories. Indeed, they *could*. But do they? The underlying model of theological inquiry needs to be spelled out.²⁴ The lump gets bigger the more you chew.

The foregoing suggests that the insight gained from the now-this/now-that strategy can be gained just reasoning from a consistent fragment of the apparently contradictory doctrine. But it is even further from a proof than the theoretical argument from inertness, with its tenuous association of understanding with ordinary propositions. Here the connection is also

²²It is also worth noting that Beall's statement is stronger than necessary, and worrisome for that reason. Reasoning from “Christ is divine” with no judgment about his humanity is one thing. Reasoning from “Christ is divine and Christ is not human”, without any affirmation of “Christ is human”, is hardly Chalcedonian orthodoxy! It would be troublesome indeed if orthodoxy is simply the practice of alternating heresies!

²³Here, one reasons (classically) within consistent “chunks” of an inconsistent theory to obtain conclusions that then “flow” or “permeate” to another consistent chunk for further reasoning. See [7, 8, 6]. Chunk and permeate, of course, is a model for scientific reasoning, which we have been at pains to differentiate from theological reasoning. But one could imagine applying it towards conclusions along the devotional axis.

²⁴To be fair, there are models of inquiry, both broad [19] and specific [7, 8, 6, 21, 29, 31] that describe reasoning from contradictions, though in other domains. I have my quibbles which (for now) I will keep to myself.

tenuous: only ordinary propositions are devotionally usable.²⁵

This assumption seems, even to me, evidently false. Many mystics of various traditions, including Christian ones, have had profound, transforming experiences through apparent affirmation of certain contradictions. But we must treat these with care. Beall's program in Christology is explicitly non-mystical: even where the goals are (according to me) devotional, the way to these benefits is the enunciation of *truths*. So the question is whether truths fostering Christian devotion can come through accepting Christological contradictions. That such truths would be "ordinary" seems more plausible in this context.

Here it is worth contrasting the role of contradictions in Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (MMK) and its various receptions—or at least the account of it given by Garfield and Priest. Nāgārjuna's doctrine is the contradiction: the ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate truth [26, p. 263, quoting from Siderits]. But this is proposed in soteriological service: it enables "the relinquishing of all views" (MMK XXVII.30),²⁶ a state of mind from which the "entire mass of suffering . . . thereby completely ceases" (MMK XXVI.12). That's Garfield's reading of the Tibetan reception of the MMK; the practical import is even more evident in the Zen reception: affirming the contradiction is a "Great Death" from which one can "awaken". It is one thing to realize there are no ultimate truths, it is another to trust this, to "give up the need for foundations" [18, p. 74]. Once one internalizes the contradiction—trusts the emptiness (non-ultimateness) of all things—one sees that emptiness "has canceled itself" [18, p. 78]. This is the achievement the contradiction enables: a *state of seeing* "as the buddha does," free from a certain ignorance [18, p. 81]. The truth sought is one that reframes the act of truth-seeking.

Some mystical Christian traditions might say similar things, but theirs is a different approach to theology than Beall's, whose aims are emphatically non-mystical [4, p. 46]. Christology's aim is the true theory of the Incarnation, whether to better understand or better adore Christ. It isn't clear, then, that contradiction has a use in this kind of Christian theology.

²⁵There is also the added complication that devotional insights might be in a different language from the creedal premises, transformed as they may be by the detour through the salvation narrative.

²⁶Quotations are from [17].

8 Conclusion: What then?

One may easily get the impression from my critical comments that I am a friend of consistentizing, and an enemy of contradiction. In fact I am neither, or maybe both. My criticisms are motivated largely by what we stand to lose by embracing contradiction without proper consideration. Contradictions are inferential dead ends if accepted simply as the full truth—they leave non-mystical theology nowhere to go.

Beall (and others)²⁷ deserve credit for making us face the losses and gains of each strategy. And I do think we can stand to gain, both theoretically and devotionally, by tolerating theological contradictions. It would be strange if not: contradictory reasoning has had heuristic benefit even in the sciences.²⁸ Still, tolerating contradictions is different from endorsing them. I’m pessimistic, based on the considerations I’ve offered, on the benefits of the latter, but I’d be pleased to be proven wrong—I’m even less an oracle than I am a theologian.

I’m less pessimistic about a more general *paraconsistent*—not *contradictory*—strategy. Paraconsistent logics like FDE need not be interpreted as Beall does, as admissive of gluts. One can get exactly FDE’s consequence relation without mentioning gluts or gaps.²⁹ So we can deny that contradictions entailed by the conciliar pronouncements are absurd or trivializing, but refrain from saying “Christ is mutable” is both true and false.

But what then, and to what end? If there is no progress by affirming the glut, where is it? My remarks above divulge my inclinations towards “epistemic mystery” strategy Beall surveys in [4, §5.7]: inferential dead ends can indicate exactly the blind spots we should expect, given our limitations.³⁰

But then if we want to make progress, the question remains: what then? There seem to be two options. The first is to offer refined concepts in hope of

²⁷See [5, 10, 30].

²⁸There are several examples, among them Newton’s “evanescent quantities” (see [7, 27]), Heaviside’s logically dodgy algebraic treatment of differential operators [32, 20, 12], and Dirac’s δ function [6, 12]. More generally see [20, 32, 13, 21, 31].

²⁹See [1, p. 13], which shows $A \vdash_{\text{FDE}} B$ holds iff A *tautologically* entails B —the latter being a property involving classical consequence among specially selected formulæ. More generally for the history of FDE and its characterizations, see [23].

³⁰An interesting correlate can be found in Franks’s articulation of an interesting logic from the Talmudic tradition, wherein certain inference patterns cannot be iterated when concerning “the realm of the sacred” [15]. It is worth noting that this logic is not articulated semantically at all.

filling in the blind spots, much as we add “indigo” to increase our capacities to talk about blue-purple shades. I don’t know if this can be carried out in a way that avoids the problem, though: if the Incarnation, as so much else about God, is a mystery, then we do not get appreciably closer with greater specificity, even if the enhanced scheme is in some ways “better”. But further, the track record isn’t great, in that such conceptual refinements have come as metaphysical speculations. With these Beall [4, p. 145] and I are alike uneasy.

The other option is just to keep quiet. In many moods this is my answer, but it admittedly isn’t a forward path theologically, even if it is devotionally.³¹

Anselm also asks “What then?”, then suggests a cryptic third answer: “we signify through some other thing what we are either unwilling or unable to express properly, as when we speak in riddles” [2, *Monologion* LXV].³² Concepts work differently in the context of a riddle. In both Beall’s contradictory approach, and consistentizing speculations, concepts whether new or old are inflexible: there are rules for, e.g., mutability that something abides or doesn’t. But, as Cora Diamond notes, to untangle a riddle requires willingness to treat and apply concepts new and unexpected ways:

[I]n the riddle-phrase we have something that looks like a description, but what it is for that ‘description’ to fit something has not been settled. [14, p. 273–4]

Diamond here is speaking of what might be termed “found” riddles, as opposed to “curated” ones. A curated riddle is one where someone has cleverly shifted meanings so the solution is hard to find. A found riddle—following Wittgenstein, Diamond thinks some mathematical questions count—is one where it seems such a solution should exist even if it isn’t clear the solution has an intending mind behind it. In either case, we search for ways the words can mean that will make sense of the riddle-phrase. *Unsolved* riddles have “promissory meaning” only, they are “no more than the outer surface of what will be a true proposition”—when solved, when we determine an apt answer

³¹Franks [15] articulates an interesting logic from the Talmudic tradition, wherein certain inference patterns cannot be iterated when concerning “the realm of the sacred”. This logic is not articulated semantically at all.

³²Worth noting: Anselm’s contemplation at the outset of *Proslogion* I is, like Augustine’s in *Confessions* I, plagued by riddles: “Lord, if you are not here, where shall I seek you, since you are absent? But if you are everywhere, why do I not see you, since you are present?” [2]

[14, p. 283]. *Great* riddles are ever unsolved: they have the promise of meaning but ‘allude’ “to a language whose full transparency to us is ruled out” [14, p. 282]. We might, in light of this, regard the doctrine of the Incarnation as a great riddle, wherein its full meaning is ever beyond us, but the puzzling over which constitutes some sort of progress nevertheless.

What kind of progress? Let’s turn back to Anselm. The transcendence of God is already lodged in the background of *Monologion*’s “What then?”, so it is fitting that *Proslogion*, at least as Walz [28] narrates it, does not *solve* the riddle as might be traditionally expected.³³ It rather invites the reader to follow Anselm’s faith-seeking-understanding *thinking patterns* [28, p. 132]. These will please (and give rest to) her heart “in the way that Anselm himself had been pleased . . . [as by] achieving a difficult good” [28, p. 137].

The kind of riddle-reflection *Proslogion* invites involves the mind, but does not present a solution that can be obtained absent the form of thought Anselm demonstrates. And so the theological gain from the exercise could be communicable only by leading another through that very exercise. I think it should be neither above nor below us to think of such truth-seeking contemplation as a part of theological inquiry.

This is inadequate as an account of how to do theology in light of paradox, but I hope it hints at an attitude that appreciates the ineliminability of contradiction from Christology, but avoids the concerns I’ve tried to elucidate. Contradictions—at least in the context of holy mysteries—should deeply unsettle us. Beall likely agrees, but would isolate the disquiet from the inputs of logic. Perhaps the Anselmian vision I’ve (barely) sketched offers a less compartmentalized, and more conceptually flexible, way of proceeding.³⁴

³³The riddle in *Proslogion*, of course, isn’t the Incarnation, but “that than which nothing greater can be thought”. But the lesson is the same.

³⁴Thanks for helpful comments, discussion, and inspiring correspondence to Mark Alzauer, Jc Beall, Ryan Davis, Curtis Franks, Meghan Page, Jonathan Rutledge (especially for the discussion of trust and that in footnote 5), and Leon Sommer-Simpson; the last of whom also provided research assistance funded by the Northwestern University Undergraduate Research Assistance Program grant. Kyla Ebels-Duggan formulated the point Petterson attributes to Athanasius long before either of us read [25]; I’m grateful for her insight, influence, and further discussion (and much more). Mistakes, oversimplifications, and anything else embarrassing, are completely original to me.

References

- [1] Alan Ross Anderson and Nuel Belnap. Tautological entailments. *Philosophical Studies*, 13:9–24, 1962.
- [2] Anselm. *Basic Writings*. Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis, 2007. Translated by Thomas Williams.
- [3] Athanasius. *The Letters of Saint Athanasius concerning the Holy Spirit*. The Epworth Press, London, 1951.
- [4] Jc Beall. *The Contradictory Christ*. Oxford Studies in Analytic Theology. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2021.
- [5] Jc Beall and A. J. Cotnoir. God of the gaps: A neglected reply to god’s stone problem. *Analysis*, 77(4):681–689, 2017.
- [6] Richard Benham, Chris Mortensen, and Graham Priest. Chunk and permeate III: The Dirac delta function. *Synthese*, 191(13):3057–3062, 2014.
- [7] Bryson Brown and Graham Priest. Chunk and permeate, a paraconsistent inference strategy. part I: The infinitesimal calculus. *Journal of Philosophical Logic*, 33(4):379–388, 2004.
- [8] M. Bryson Brown and Graham Priest. Chunk and permeate II: Bohr’s hydrogen atom. *European Journal for Philosophy of Science*, 5(3):297–314, 2015.
- [9] Tim Button. *Metatheory*. 2018.
- [10] A. J. Cotnoir. Theism and dialetheism. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 96(3):592–609, 2018.
- [11] A. J. Cotnoir. On the role of logic in analytic theology: Exploring the wider context of beall’s philosophy of logic. *Journal of Analytic Theology*, 7(1):508–528, 2019.
- [12] Kevin Davey. Is mathematical rigor necessary in physics? *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, 54(3):439–463, 2003.

- [13] Kevin Davey. Can good science be logically inconsistent? *Synthese*, 191(13):3009–3026, 2014.
- [14] Cora Diamond. *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and the Mind*. MIT Press, London, 1995.
- [15] Curtis Franks. The realm of the sacred, wherein we may not draw an inference from something which itself has been inferred: A reading of talmud bavli zevachim folio 50. *History and Philosophy of Logic*, 33(1):69–86, 2012.
- [16] Gottlob Frege. *The Foundations of Arithmetic: A Logico-Mathematical Enquiry into the Concept of Number*. Northwestern University Press, Evanston, second edition, 1980. Translated by John Langshaw Austin.
- [17] Jay L. Garfield. *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nagarjuna's Mulamadhyamakakarika: Nagarjuna's Mulamadhyamakakarika*. Oxford University Press, 1995.
- [18] Jay L. Garfield and Graham Priest. Mountains are just mountains. In Jay L. Garfield, Tom J. F. Tillemans, and Mario D'Amato, editors, *Pointing at the Moon: Buddhism, Logic, Analytic Philosophy*, chapter 6. Oxford University Press, 2009.
- [19] Gilbert Harman. *Change in View: Principles of Reasoning*. Cambridge, MA, USA: MIT Press, 1986.
- [20] Penelope Maddy. *Second Philosophy: A Naturalistic Method*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2007.
- [21] Chris Mortensen. Inconsistent mathematics. In *Studia Logica*, pages 285–287. 2008.
- [22] Roger Olson. *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition and Reform*. InterVarsity Press, 1999.
- [23] Hitoshi Omori and Heinrich Wansing. 40 years of fde. *Studia Logica*, 105:1021–1049, 2017.
- [24] Meghan D. Page. Detachment issues: A dilemma for beall's contradictory christology. *Journal of Analytic Theology*, 9:201–204, 2021.

- [25] Alwyn Pettersen. *Athanasius*. Outstanding Christian thinkers. Geoffrey Chapman, London, 1995.
- [26] Graham Priest. *Beyond the Limits of Thought*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- [27] Sean Walsh and Tim Button. *Philosophy and Model Theory*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2018.
- [28] Matthew D. Walz. The "logic" of faith seeking understanding: A propaedeutic for anselm's proslogion. *Dionysius*, 28, 2010.
- [29] Z. Weber. A paraconsistent model of vagueness. *Mind*, 119(476):1025–1045, 2010.
- [30] Zach Weber. Atheism and dialetheism; or, 'why i am not a (paraconsistent) christian'. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 97(2):401–407, 2019.
- [31] Zach Weber. *Paradoxes and Inconsistent Mathematics*. Cambridge University Press, 2021.
- [32] Mark Wilson. *Wandering Significance: An Essay on Conceptual Behavior*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2006.