

Incarnation and Causality

by

Prof. Tersur Aben

Thesis:

Christians confess that God emptied himself of transcendence and took human nature, as Jesus Christ, to save humans from sin and death. This confession entails that God changed from being transcendent to being non-transcendent, i.e., God moved from being non-human to being human, during his incarnation. Since every change has a cause, the change in God must have a cause. So, what caused God to change from being transcendent to being non-transcendent? St. John posits a primal facial single cause – love – saying that God so loved the world that he gave his only son to die for it.¹ Some theologians argue that our sins caused God to take up human nature. I will argue for plural causal relations coordinating in God to cause God to give up his transcendence and to take up human nature during the incarnation.

Suppose I fabricate a highly sophisticated robot (call it, Mr. T) and I endow it with all the intellectual properties necessary for it to discern and choose what is good. I set Mr. T in a beautiful garden and I take a trip. On returning from my trip, I find the garden totally wrecked and Mr. T severely damaged. Who am I to blame for wrecking the garden and damaging Mr. T? Obviously, I will blame Mr. T. But, I am also culpable because I made Mr. T such that he could go wrong. Had I made Mr. T an automaton without intellectual properties, he would not have erred. So, I am responsible for Mr. T's actions and I must contribute to restoring the garden and saving Mr. T.²

Similarly, God made humans in his glorious image and gave them all intellectual properties that they need in order for them to discern and to choose what is right. Then, God placed humans in Eden – a beautiful posh garden with assorted trees, vegetation, and animals – and God authorized humans to eat all the fruits in Eden, except the fruits of the tree in the middle of Eden, because the fruits of that tree were deadly to humans.

But, when God left humans in Eden, Satan invaded Eden and tactfully convinced humans to eat the forbidden fruits. Satan told humans that the fruits of the tree in the middle of Eden were not deadly to humans at all. On the contrary, Satan said, the fruits had great potential for making humans be as wise as God when they are eaten. Satan argued that God knows about the true potential of the tree, but God does not want humans to be as wise as him, and that is why God barred humans from eating the fruits. But, it is actually much more preferred to be as wise as God than not. So, Satan urged humans to eat the fruits and become wise like God. Being so enticed and convinced about the benefits of eating the fruits, humans ate them.

But after eating the fruits, humans realized that they were naked and not wise like God. So, they covered themselves with leaves and hid from God in bushes. Fortunately, the death that God forewarned humans about that would result from eating the fruits occurred gradually, not instantly. Still, humans could not circumvent death. The only way they could circumvent death was if God would intervene to save humans from death. God did intervene through Jesus

Christ, the second person of the Trinity, who emptied himself of his transcendence and took humanity to stand in for humans (Philippians 2:8ff).

The process of giving up transcendence and taking up humanity entails a causal chain of actions occurring in God. We can ask what caused God to give up his transcendence and to take up humanity to die for us?

This paper answers this question of causality in God, i.e., it says why God:

- (1) Delayed effecting the punishment of death on humans.
- (2) Gave up his transcendence to take up humanity and die instead of humans.

These are important issues that have not often been fully treated to satisfaction in discourses on incarnation. This paper identifies the set of properties or conditions that coordinated in God causing God to give up his transcendence and to take up humanity.

Although I speak of causality with reference to God, I am aware that some theologians (especially, St. Thomas Aquinas) deny the predication of any causal relations to God. Aquinas denies that causal relations can be predicated of God because that would render God contingent and impotent. Aquinas maintains that God is a necessary being who is pure actuality. Therefore, nothing can move God or cause God to change from one state of existence to another state of existence or actuality.³

But since all causalities are either extrinsic or intrinsic to the thing, so if anything caused God to change in any way, the causality must be extrinsic or intrinsic to God. I concur with Aquinas that nothing extrinsic to God can cause God to act but it seems quite plausible for something intrinsic to God to cause God to act. So, I will grant that something intrinsic to God causes God to act, i.e., some antecedent event or condition or a set of properties in God causes the subsequent event of God emptying transcendence and taking on humanity.⁴ I will identify the antecedent intrinsic cause condition that is subsequent to the event of God giving up his transcendence and taking up humanity as God's grace, mercy, and love.

In the *Cur Deus Homo*, St. Anselm identifies our sin as the final cause of God giving up his transcendence and taking up human nature. Anselm says that it was to redeem us from sin that God emptied himself of transcendence and took humanity.⁵ We can rephrase Anselm's claim as that our sin *caused* God to give up his transcendence and to take up humanity to redeem us from sin. Stating it this way allows us to readily see how Anselm's view differs from Aquinas' denial of extrinsic causality in God. I have conceded Aquinas' denial of extrinsic causality in God and so will not merely admit our sin as the essential cause of God giving up his transcendence and taking up humanity. I think that other conditions supervened or caused God to give up his transcendence and to take up humanity.

John Calvin also employed the concept of causality to show us *how* God's death on Calvary effectively saved us from sin and death, thereby restoring us to perfect fellowship with God.⁶ This is treated in the doctrine of atonement, which I will not address here, but instead I deal with incarnation. I will argue that the intrinsic coordination of grace, mercy, and love caused God to give up his transcendence and to take up humanity. Knowing that God's grace, mercy, and love acted in God to cause God to save us from sin should heighten our appreciation of God.

Before stating my argument, I will first define two key words: transcendence and grace. Then, I will comment on some contemporary philosophical theories about how deity allied with humanity in Jesus during his incarnation. I will conclude with a brief argument showing how God's grace, mercy, and love caused God to give up his transcendence and to take up humanity in the incarnation.

Transcendence – as I am using the term here – denotes the unique set of divine properties that constitutes divine nature and which makes divine nature stand above human nature. It is not easy to list all the divine properties that constitute divine nature because they are many. A number of divine properties are already part of our theological vocabulary, but we do not know all of them. Even the ones that we know we still do not fully comprehend because God is Spirit and we (humans) generally have limited knowledge of spiritual constituents. Still, we know that whatever it is that makes an entity spiritual is ontologically different from what makes an entity material. So, God transcends humanity.

Grace – as I am using the term here – refers to the set of divine properties that is often denoted by the terms love, just, mercy and the like. Theologians distinguish between common grace and special grace by letting common grace refer to God's act of sustaining humans after the fall and special grace refer to God's act of redeeming humans from sin and death. I will not use this distinction here though because it is not germane to my argument. Rather, I will continue to speak simply of God's grace.

Analysis

It is a truism that God's nature transcends human nature. St. Anselm alludes to this in his apt definition of God as “the most perfect being than which none more perfect can be conceived.”⁷ A perfect being necessarily exemplifies great-making properties like omnipotence, omnipresence, omniscience, eternity and moral goodness to a maximal degree. Human beings are not perfect so they necessarily do not exemplify great-making properties. Intuitively, we can say that God's exemplification of great-making properties makes God transcendent over human beings.

To clearly state God's transcendence over humans, we posit ontological distinctions between God and humans: God is omnipotent while humans are not; God is omnipresent while humans are localized; God is omniscient while humans are limited in knowledge; God is eternal while humans are temporal; God is perfect while humans are imperfect; God is holy while humans are sinners, etc. This list clearly shows how unimaginable it is, under normal circumstances, for God to take up humanity. But, God graciously gave up transcendence to take up humanity in the incarnation.

Some theologians may argue that since the Scriptures depict humans as created in God's image and likeness, there is an ontological sameness between divinity and humanity such that God could easily adopt humanity. This is an erroneous argument that lacks warrant. It fails to note ontological and moral distinctions between divinity and humanity. Besides, likeness does not equal sameness. So, the fact that humans were created in the image and likeness of God

does not entail that humans are the *same* as God. Also, the drastic effect of sin on the image of God in human beings has further widened the gap between humans and God.

St. Paul emphasizes the diminished image of God in humans due to sin that rendered humans totally deprived of holiness or righteousness.⁸ Similarly, St. John acknowledges the inherent sinfulness of humans by saying that anyone who denies being a sinner demonstrates thereby that he or she is a liar.⁹ God alone is not a sinner; hence God transcends humanity.¹⁰

But quite remarkably, the Bible tells us that, in spite of the transcendence of God over humanity, God took human nature and became like us in all things, except sin.¹¹ Paul explains the process of God becoming human as entailing God emptying himself of transcendence (Philippians 2:8f). I take this claim to mean that God gave up his non-essential divine properties, i.e., his great-making properties, to take up humanity. These non-essential divine properties are incompatible with essential human properties that God had to take to be truly human. Since God could not retain them and also take up essential human properties God graciously relinquished his properties of transcendence to take up humanity. In this way, God became human without ever contradicting his essential nature.

But something must have caused God to give up his non-essential properties and to take up essential human properties during the incarnation. But what is it? I will argue for a chain or set of causalities. This intrinsic set or chain of causalities consists of God's grace, mercy, and love.

The Two-Minds Theory

In explaining the doctrine of incarnation, Thomas V. Morris emphatically denies that God gave up any of his great-making properties or transcendence to take up humanity.¹² Morris maintains that even in the incarnation, God fully retained all his great-making properties – thus his transcendence – because God's great-making properties are essential to God. Essential properties are such that their possessor cannot give them up at any time ($t_1 \dots t_n$). That is, if any property is essential to an object, then at all time and in all state of affairs that object exemplifies the essential property. Therefore, if properties are essential to God, God must exemplify them at all times and in all states of affairs. At any time (between $t_1 \dots t_n$) that God fails to exemplify his essential properties then at that time God ceases to be God. But, it is impossible for God to cease to be God at any given time at all. Morris concludes that even during his incarnation God necessarily exemplified his essential divine properties. Morris says,

I take omnipotence and omniscience, for example, to be such properties essential to deity. And, following standard Anselmian intuitions, I take the strongly modalized properties of *necessary* omnipotence (omnipotence in all possible worlds and at all times in any such worlds) and necessary omniscience to be ingredient in deity as well. Thus, on this picture, no individual could possibly be God without being omnipotent.¹³

Two points are worth noting in Morris' argument. These are: (1) All of God's properties are essential to God and (2) All of God's properties are compatible with human properties. Morris' position is commonly subscribed to by "perfect-being theologians" who insist that all God properties are essential to God. Therefore, God cannot give up any of his properties. But there are no good grounds for this argument. Morris merely assumes that if God gave up any of his properties then God would cease to be God. But if not all of God's properties are essential to God in all states of God's existence, then clearly when God is incarnated he can choose to give up some of his properties that render him ontologically transcendent to human beings. So, to become human, God gave up his great-making properties.

Regarding the second point, Morris argues that all of God's properties are compatible with human nature. He distinguishes between being *fully* human and being *merely* human. Morris says that properties that make someone fully human are compatible with properties that make someone fully divine. It is properties that make someone merely human that are incompatible with properties that make someone fully divine. The dialectical opposition between humanity and divinity is, therefore, at the level of *mere* humanity and full divinity.

To be merely human is to exemplify non-essential human properties such as sin, while to be fully human is to exemplify only essential human properties. Since Jesus was not merely human during his incarnation, but fully human, Jesus did not have extraneous human properties that contravened his essential divine properties. Therefore, Jesus' divine and human properties fitted well. So, Morris says, "Only if we assume that it is necessary for being human, or for having a human nature, that an individual lack any of those properties ingredient in deity, do we have an obvious logical and metaphysical obstacle to the orthodox two natures view of God."¹⁴

But what held the divine properties and the human properties of Jesus together? Morris answers that Jesus had two minds: the divine mind and the human mind. The divine mind retained all divine properties while the human mind retained all human properties in Jesus. Morris acknowledges that it is extremely hard for us to see just how one person can simultaneously have two minds. But he notes that we are talking about Jesus who is fully God, and God can do what, to us, seems utterly impossible.

Having two minds explains some apparent contradictory asseverations by Jesus, Morris says. Such an asseveration would be Jesus' claim to not knowing the time he would come again, which only the Father knows. This can be explained as the operation of Jesus' human mind. The divine mind of Jesus was omniscient so it knew when Jesus would come again. So, Jesus' lack of knowledge about when he would come again can be explained as deriving from the epistemic content of his human mind. This dualistic explanation can be given to other instances where Jesus claimed ignorance or exhibited inability to do something.

Still, Morris cannot satisfactorily account for the relationship between the human mind and the divine mind of Jesus. Morris posits a hierarchical relationship, which he calls asymmetrical accessing relationship, between the divine mind and the human mind of Jesus. Morris explains that whereas the divine mind of Jesus had full access to the human mind of Jesus, the human mind of Jesus had limited access to the divine mind of Jesus. But, then, the asymmetric accessing relationship between the two minds of Jesus suggests disharmony or secrecy between the two minds of Jesus. One person holding two disharmonious and secret minds is not normal – it entails split personalities. But Jesus was a normal person who did not have split personalities. So, Morris' argument for two minds in Jesus lacks warrant.¹⁵

The Kenosis Theory

In the mid 19th century, a conceptual shift occurred in much of European thought and speech about God which bears on the doctrine of incarnation. The shift was from thinking and talking about God as Being to thinking and talking about God as Becoming. Sara Joan Miles attests to this shift saying that European theologians no longer maintained that God is ontologically static and that God's revelation in the Scriptures is absolute. The shift in European thought and speech about God led some to propose a continuous dynamic revelation of God.¹⁶ H. R. Macintosh, I. A. Dorner and Gottfried Thomasius defended the kenosis theory of incarnation, which presents God as emptying himself of deity and taking up humanity during his incarnation.

One way of explicating the kenosis theory is to say that Jesus emptied himself of all his great-making properties like omnipresence, omnipotence, eternity, immutability and omniscience to take on humble properties of a servant during his incarnation. These great-making properties or attributes ground God's transcendence, so in giving them up Jesus was no longer transcendent to humans.

Prompted by St. Paul's testimony that Jesus emptied himself and took humanity, becoming like us in all ways except sin,¹⁷ Thomasius argues that Jesus emptied great-making properties like omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence during his incarnation. The great-making properties of God are necessary for ruling the world, but when God takes a humble servant nature to serve humanity, God does not need great-making properties. Hence, Jesus willingly gave them up during his incarnation.¹⁸

Giving up great-making properties entails that Jesus was not transcendent during his incarnation and taking up essential human properties makes possible that God could regard Jesus' suffering and death as human suffering and death. Since Jesus was fully human, God imputed his suffering and death on Calvary to humans.

A difficulty Kenosis theorists must surmount is the supposition that Jesus exemplified some properties contingently, that is, he has properties that he can give up. If Jesus' properties are essential, then Jesus cannot give them up and he would exemplify them at all times. But if Jesus was fully God during the incarnation and yet lacked these properties, then they are contingent properties to God. Indeed, kenosis theorists urge that we review our characterization of divine essential properties in light of the incarnation. Stephen T. Davis says:

I certainly hold that they are properties of God, and I also believe that God (like all beings) must have certain of his properties essentially. But with most actually existing beings (as opposed, say, to mathematical entities like squares or segments) it is not easy to say which of their properties are essential to them. . . . Furthermore, the fact that I believe both that Jesus Christ was God and that Jesus Christ was non-omniscient leads me to deny that omniscience is essential to God.¹⁹

Davis thinks that we err in deciding *a priori* that all divine properties are essential to God. The only legitimate way to ascertain essential divine properties is to see which properties God exemplifies at all times and in all states of his existence.

If we critically examine the properties that Jesus had during the incarnation, we will clearly see that Jesus lacked omniscience, omnipotence and omnipresence. But before the incarnation, Jesus had these properties. So, then these properties are not essential to God, and God could do without them. But God cannot do without any of his essential properties, even during the incarnation, because they fix God's identity.

Causality

Now, let me state my brief argument in support of the claim that God's grace, love, and mercy caused God to give up his transcendence and to take up human nature. The argument I am presenting is based on this principle:

(x) If x has a property at t_1 but lacks it at t_2 or if x lacks a property at t_1 but has it at t_2 then something caused x to have the property or to lack the property.

A cause is a necessary and sufficient preceding condition that supervenes on a subsequent condition. We can deduce from God's self-emptying of transcendence and taking up of humanity during the incarnation that something caused change in God. The cause must be actual in God and *ceteris paribus* sufficient and necessary to bring about this change in God.

Now, whatever caused God to give up his non-essential divine properties and to take essential human properties precedes the subsequent condition in God. The preceding condition is necessary and sufficient for God to do what is not natural for God to do. Theologians identify love as the precedent condition in God that caused God to take up humanity. But this answer is not sufficient. In addition to love there is the precedent condition of grace and mercy in God that operated in God in such a way that led God to take up humanity. It means that there is a set of conditions in God that coordinated in their causal operations causing God to change from being transcendent to being non-transcendent in the incarnation.

If God did not love human beings, he would not have done everything possible to save humans from sin and death. But love is not the only thing that God was acting upon. Since humans sinned against God and they did nothing to amend their sin against God, it took the unilateral act of mercy by God for God to redeem humans. Had not God been merciful to humans, God would not have emptied himself of divinity to save humans.

Similarly, if God were not abundantly gracious, he could not have willingly died in the place of humans especially since humans did not ask God to die for them. Clearly, God's possession of these properties and their coordination in God constitutes the necessary preceding condition in God that caused God to give up his transcendence and to take human nature in the person of Jesus Christ.

This analogy may illustrate the essence of this argument. Suppose you jump out of an airplane well assured that your parachute is excellent but unknown to you it had a malfunctioning part. So, you are hauling down to the ground at great speed. Then reaching the correct height you pull the cord to release the parachute, but nothing happens, so you are falling to your death. Another jumper sees as the ugly scenario unfolds. He jumps out of the airplane to catch up with you and so shares his parachute with you so you won't hit the ground and die. We will be right to say that love for you caused the person to jump out of the airplane to come and save you. But he may love you and yet not have what a parachute, so he won't jump out of the airplane. Therefore, his love, his possession of a good parachute, and a gracious heart coordinated in him causing him to jump out of the airplane to save you.

Clearly, the answer to the question of what caused the person to jump out of the airplane is your predicament, his love for you, his possession of a good parachute, and his gracious heart. All these conditions or state of affairs coordinated in the causal relationship of the person saving you from your impending death. Similarly, God's love, mercy, and grace coordinated to cause God to give up his non-essential properties and to take up essential human properties to save us from sin.

Conclusion

In conclusion, let me reiterate that God gave up his transcendence in the incarnation and took human nature to save human beings from sin and death. It was God's grace that caused God to give up his transcendence and to take human nature to save humans from sin and death. It was necessary for God to sacrifice his transcendence to save humans, so God sacrificed his transcendence to save humans from sin and death. God did this in Jesus, the second person of the Godhead.

The salvation of humans from sin and death rests on the operation of God's grace, mercy, and love for human beings. Had God not saved humans from sin, humans would not have known or appreciated God's unconditional love and abundant grace. Indeed, God was gracious in creating humans, but even more gracious in his redemption of human beings from sin and death.

Had God failed to save humans or to restore human fellowship with him, they would have been justly damned to destruction. But, thank God, God freely gave up his divine transcendence to save human beings from sin and death. Our salvation is, indeed, a wonderful expression of God's abundant grace, undeserving mercy, and unconditional love.

¹ John 3:16

² Let me briefly substantiate this claim by saying that some theologians, using secondary causation, blame God for the entry of sin into the world. They argue that it is God who gave human beings the free will to choose between good and evil. But God could have created human beings such that they always do only what is right. It seems that God had the power to create human beings to always do only what is right. If God has this power, but he did not use it, then God should be blamed for creating human beings such that they can go wrong. (cf. John Mackie, "The Problem of Evil,")

³ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.3.6.

⁴ John L. Mackie, "Causes and Conditions," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 2 (1965): 245-264.

⁵ St. Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo*.

⁶ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1949).

⁷ St. Anselm of Canterbury, *Proslogium* chapter II, in *St. Anselm's Basic Writings*, trans. S. N. Deane (La Salle: Open Court Pub.Co.1961), pp. 53-54.

⁸ Romans 3:23

⁹ I John 1:8.

¹⁰ Romans 5:12.

¹¹ Philippians 2:8ff. This way of reading the passage of Philippians removes any contradiction in the claim that God became human.

¹² Thomas V. Morris, *The Logic of God Incarnate* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1986); Thomas V. Morris, "The Metaphysics of God Incarnate," in *Trinity, Incarnation and Atonement: Philosophical and Theological Essays*, eds. Ronald J. Feenstra and Cornelius Plantinga Jr. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989).

¹³ Thomas V. Morris, "The Metaphysics of God Incarnate," in *Trinity, Incarnation, and Atonement*, Eds. Ronald J. Feenstra and Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1989), p. 114.

¹⁴ Morris, "The Metaphysics of God Incarnate," p. 115.

¹⁵ Eleanore Stump, "Review of *The Logic of God Incarnate*," *Faith and Philosophy*, 6:2 (1989), p. 221.

¹⁶ Sara Joan Miles, "From Being to Becoming: Science and Theology in the Eighteenth Century," *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith*, 43:4 (Dec. 1991), p. 215.

¹⁷ Philippians 2:8ff.

¹⁸ Gottfried Thomasius, "Christ's Person and Work," in *God and Incarnation in Mid-Nineteenth Century German Theology*, trans and ed. Claude Welch, A Library of Protestant Theology (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 37.

¹⁹ Stephen T. Davis, *Logic and the Nature of God* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1983), p. 124.