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The Word Made Flesh: Dualism, Physicalism,
and the Incarnation*Trenton Merricks*

The Incarnation is beautiful and mysterious, awe-inspiring and humbling. The metaphysics of “embodiment” is, in comparison, drab and petty. And so a paper on the Incarnation that focused on God the Son’s relation to his body would be like a paper on the history of music that focused on the kazoo. Nevertheless, I shall ask: “How is the incarnate God the Son related to his body?”

This is not the most important question about the Incarnation. Nor is it a traditional question. For example, it is not (at least not obviously) a question about human nature or a question about divine nature or even a question about the union of the two. It is not a question explicitly addressed in creedal discussions of the Incarnation. And so, if (for example) this paper were an exegesis of the Chalcedonian Definition, I might have no business asking this question, let alone answering it. But, though I intend to stay within the Definition’s parameters, such exegesis is not my project.

My project starts by assuming that God the Son, in virtue of being incarnate, is related to his body just as you and I are related to our respective bodies. This assumption opens up a way to explore the Incarnation, a way in addition to examining the creeds. For, given this assumption, one’s view on how each of us is related to his or her body should dictate one’s view on how the Son is related to his body. Conversely, if an account of embodiment is untenable in the case of the Son and his body, it is untenable in our case as well. And so my starting assumption opens up not just a way to investigate the Incarnation, but also an Incarnation-based way to investigate the relation between person and body in general.

Although controversial, my starting assumption is quite plausible. For the incarnate Son is fully human and so, presumably, human in the same sense that you and I are. Part of being human, at least in this life, is having a body. And

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so, presumably, the Son has a body in the same sense that you and I do. More generally, he is related to his body just as each and every other human is related to his or her body.¹

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1. SUBSTANCE DUALISM

The word ‘soul’ can be used in many ways. Throughout this paper, I shall use ‘soul’ to mean a thing or object or substance that has mental properties but lacks physical properties. Because a soul has mental properties, a soul can believe that the sun is shining, hope that rain will come soon, and be appeared to red-ly. Because it lacks physical properties, a soul has no mass, fails to be extended in space, and reflects no light.

Substance dualists (hereafter ‘dualists’) believe in souls. Indeed, dualists say that each human person just is—is identical with—a soul.² Obviously, if we are souls, we are not bodies. Nor do we have bodies as parts. Nevertheless, even dualists believe that, in this life at least, we “have bodies”.

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According to the typical dualistic picture, a soul’s having a body is partly a matter of that soul’s having direct causal control over that body. For example, when I—suppose I am a soul—intend that my left arm move, the left arm of “my body” moves. Of course, I can indirectly cause things outside of my own body. I could indirectly cause your arm to rise by my lifting your arm with my hand. But this is not a case of direct causal control, since I cannot make your arm rise simply by intending that it does.³

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¹ A venerable theory of the Incarnation—arguably, the historically dominant theory—seems to reject this assumption. This is the theory that God the Son, in the Incarnation, “took up” an “individual human nature”. This individual human nature is supposed to be intrinsically just like a complete human person. Indeed, it would have been a human person had it not—perhaps *per impossibile*—been taken up by God the Son. (A theory along these lines is associated with, for example, Aquinas, Scotus, and Ockham (for discussion, see Freddoso 1986).) But I have a hard time seeing how the individual human nature fails to be a human person (as it must, lest this theory be Nestorian). Moreover, it is hard to see how “taking up” an individual human nature makes God the Son human in the same way you and I are human; and if he is not human just as we are, I do not see how he could be fully human.

² Some dualists deny that a person is identical with a soul, saying instead that each human person is a composite of soul and body. This is a minority view among dualistic philosophers, and for good reason. For, if there are souls, they have mental properties. Persons have mental properties, too. So the dualist who denies that a person is identical with a soul must say that there are two objects with mental properties (a person and her soul) where normally we think there is one. (For more objections to the claim that a person is a composite of soul and body, see Merricks, 2001a: 47–53, esp. 48 n. 9, and Olson 2001.)

³ My intending to raise my arm causes events in my brain, starting a chain of causes, which result in my arm’s rising. So I may not cause my arm to rise *directly*. But the relevant point is that, according to the dualist, the only physical events that I directly cause are events in my own body, including my own brain. Along similar lines, suppose my hands are tied behind my back—or the nerves in my arms are injured—so that I cannot raise my arm just by intending to do so. This does not render me disembodied, since my soul could still directly cause events in my brain.

Given typical dualism, the union of soul and body is partly constituted by the soul's having direct control over the body. In addition, the union of soul and body involves the body's influencing the soul. For example, when a blue piece of paper is in front of a body—a body with its eyes open, in plenty of light, etc.—that body causes “its soul” to know that a blue piece of paper is located there.

Dualists are explicit about all this. Thus Richard Swinburne:

A person has a body if there is a chunk of matter through which he makes a difference to the material world, and through which he acquires true beliefs about that world. Those persons who are men have bodies because stimuli landing on their eyes or ears give them true beliefs about the world, which they would not otherwise have; and they make differences to the world by moving arms and legs, lips and fingers. Our bodies are the vehicles of our knowledge and operation. The ‘linking’ of body and soul consists in there being a body which is related to the soul in this way. (1986: 146)

According to Swinburne, a person's standing in the appropriate causal relations to a body—or a “chunk of matter”—is all there is to a soul's having a body.⁴ Given this picture, embodiment is a cluster of relations, all of which involve some sort of epistemic access or direct control. The more of these embodiment-constituting relations that hold between an immaterial person and a body, the “more embodied” that person is (cf. Swinburne 1986: 151). And so, according to this picture, embodiment can come in degrees. (For example, a soul could leave its body gradually, as one and then another embodiment-constituting relation “shuts off”.)

I take this to be the most natural dualistic account of embodiment. Below I shall develop objections to this account. So I shall then consider other accounts, including even one that says that *having a body* is primitive and unanalyzable.⁵ But my starting point is Swinburne's account, which I believe reflects the most familiar dualistic understanding of having a body.

The Soul's Influence on a Body

The typical dualist says that a person's *having a body* just is her standing in the relevant causal relations to that body. This leads to the most familiar objection to dualism. As Daniel Dennett says:

⁴ This account of embodiment seems to rule out one's causing a cup, which is not part of one's body, to levitate simply by intending that it does. And it rules out someone's having knowledge of the physical world via the body of another. Perhaps the dualist might revise this account to permit the possibility of a bit of magic here, a little clairvoyance there. Nevertheless, her account of embodiment should rule out one's consistently having direct control over, and knowledge by way of, a body that is not one's own. If one found oneself regularly enjoying the control of, and knowledge via, a body, the dualist should say that one thereby *has* that body.

⁵ Hasker (1999) takes a soul's having a body to be that body's generating that soul. This bodes ill for the Incarnation—surely the body of Jesus does not generate God the Son—so I shall set Hasker's account aside.

The standard objection to dualism was all too familiar to Descartes himself in the seventeenth century, and it is fair to say that neither he nor any subsequent dualist has ever overcome it convincingly. If mind and body are distinct things or substances, they nevertheless must interact; the bodily sense organs, via the brain, must *inform* the mind, must send to it or present it with perceptions or ideas or data of some sort, and then the mind, having thought things over must *direct* the body in appropriate action (including speech) . . . but anything that can move a physical thing is itself a physical thing. (1991: 33–5)

There are a number of replies the dualist could make to the “standard objection”. I shall focus on one that is particularly fitting in the present context. This paper explores how a commitment to the Incarnation bears on how we understand embodiment. (It also explores, conversely, how theories of embodiment bear on our understanding of the Incarnation.) The Incarnation entails theism. But theism—with its non-physical miracle-working creator God—entails that the non-physical can causally influence the physical. So, given the Incarnation, the standard objection to dualism ought to be judged unconvincing.

The Incarnation helps the dualist out of a familiar problem, providing a decisive reason to reject the premise that the physical and the non-physical cannot causally interact.⁶ But in accepting this help, the dualist takes a poisoned pawn. For, as I shall argue throughout much of this paper, the Incarnation threatens to undermine the dualist’s notion of embodiment, thereby undermining dualism itself.

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Consider, for example, dualism’s claim that having a body is partly a matter of having direct control of a body. Thus God the Son’s having the body of Jesus is partly constituted by his having direct control of that body. But that implication of dualism, and so dualism itself, seems to be mistaken. For the Son’s being embodied cannot be partly constituted by his having such control over the body of Jesus, lest to that same extent he—along with the Father and the Spirit—have every body that ever was. After all, each divine person, being omnipotent, has direct control over each and every body.⁷

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The dualist might reply that while God *has* direct control of each human body, God does not *exercise* such control.⁸ (Of course, God continually sustains

⁶ Indeed, everyone—not just the theist—ought to find the standard objection to dualism unconvincing. Compare: If God exists, then something non-physical (God) causes physical events; nothing non-physical can cause physical events; therefore, God does not exist. This argument seems neither better nor worse than the standard objection to dualism. But this argument is question-begging, or so close to question-begging as makes no difference. So the moral is that the standard objection to substance dualism likewise begs the question. (That is, the argument that takes “no causal interaction between the non-physical and physical” as a *premise* seems to beg the question against the substance dualist. Opponents of substance dualism who *argue* for the impossibility of such interaction—such as Kim (2001) and Sosa (1984)—need not beg the question.)

⁷ I shall move back and forth between claims like “God has control” and “the Father, the Son, and the Spirit have control.” But I think that the sense in which the Trinity has a property like *having control* is not the same as the sense in which each divine person has that property. For more on this, see §VII of Merricks (forthcoming).

⁸ Another reply says that God’s control of physical objects is totally unlike our control of our bodies. As a result, God does not have direct control of bodies, at least not in the sense that you and

everything in existence, but that is another matter.) For example, while God could raise my arm simply by intending that it rise, God does not do so, at least not typically. On the other hand, God the Son regularly exercises direct control over the body of Jesus. This avoids the above objection, this reply concludes, because a soul's having a body is not (partly) a matter of that soul's merely *having* direct control of that body, but is instead (partly) a matter of that soul's *exercising* such control.

This reply makes embodiment a matter of a soul's exercising control over a body. And so it implies that whenever one is not intending bodily actions, one is not embodied, or at least not embodied to the extent that embodiment is a matter of the soul's influence on the body. But that implication cannot be right. For my failing to intend bodily actions does not render me totally disembodied. Nor does it even render me somewhat less embodied than I would otherwise be. After all, embodiment does not wax and wane with everyday occurrences, such as my now intending to raise my arm, my now failing to intend any bodily action at all.

For these reasons, I conclude that embodiment is not even partly a matter of the *exercise* of direct control. Rather, insofar as the soul's influence on the body is concerned, embodiment is a matter of the soul's *having* direct control. This allows one to be fully embodied even when intending no bodily actions. (And it implies, quite plausibly, that embodiment is the precondition for, rather than the result of, exercising direct control.) Of course, this returns us to the problem already noted. Insofar as embodiment is having direct control, each divine person is thereby embodied in each human body. Indeed, it seems that each divine person is thereby embodied in each physical object.

The Body's Influence on a Soul

A soul's having a body is not merely its having direct control of that body. That is only one "direction" in the embodiment equation. The other "direction" involves the body's influence on the soul. As Swinburne says above, a person's body is that physical object "through which he acquires true beliefs about the world".

God has direct and immediate knowledge of everything in and around every body. And so insofar as having a body is having knowledge of what is in and around that body, each person of the Trinity has each and every body. This is

I do. Defending one version of this reply, Brian Leftow (1997: 120) says "In sum, God cannot in fact move matter by basic acts (again, with perhaps the exception of the Incarnation)." Suppose that God's moving matter in the way that we move our bodies is impossible. Then, given the dualist's account of embodiment, God the Son's becoming incarnate is impossible too. So this reply will not help the dualist. Further, this reply denies that God is a non-physical entity who causes physical events in the sense of 'cause' that non-physical souls cause physical events. And so, given this reply, the dualist loses her theism-based rejoinder to Dennett's "standard objection". Thus, insofar as the dualist thinks the theism-based rejoinder is a good one, she should reject this reply.

all by itself bad enough. And it threatens the Incarnation. For, to the extent that the Son has every body, he does not have the body of Jesus in particular.

I think this point is basically correct. But, to be compelling, it needs to be developed further. Moreover, it is open to more objections than the previous point, the point that the Son's omnipotence gives him the sort of direct control over each and every body that is—according to the dualist—the other “half” of embodiment. So let me consider some objections and offer some replies while, at the same time, clarifying the dualist's problem.

Objection 1: Each person of the Trinity is omniscient. So each knows “everything”. Nevertheless, each can know some things the others do not. For example, only the Father knows “I am the Father.” More to the point, only the Son knew “I am walking on water.” The Son's having the body of Jesus is partly constituted by his knowing such things, things which are appropriately correlated with that body.

Reply: The dualist denies that human persons are bodies. She denies that human persons have physical parts, such as feet. As a result, she must say that when the Son truly thinks “I am walking on water,” this is a shorthand way of thinking “my body is walking on water.” This in turn is shorthand for “the body of Jesus is walking on the water and the body of Jesus is my body.” Such beliefs presuppose that the Son has the body of Jesus. (In this regard, they are on a par with the Son's belief “I have the body Jesus.”) Thus they cannot even partly constitute his having that body.

Objection 2: It is one thing to know something. It is another for that knowledge to be caused by a body. Although each person of the Trinity knows what is happening in and around each body, it is not because events in that body cause this knowledge in God. And so it is false that insofar as embodiment involves a body's causing knowledge in a person that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit thereby have each and every body.

Reply: Consider the Platonic claim that God is self-sufficient and unchanging, thus not possibly influenced by goings-on in the physical world. If this claim were correct, bodily events could not cause knowledge in God. And so the above objection would stand. But dualistic Incarnation would not. For God the Son could not be causally influenced by what goes on in the body of Jesus. And so, at least insofar as embodiment is a matter of the body's influence on the person, God the Son could not have the body of Jesus. Therefore, in order to give the dualist a fighting chance, I shall reject this Platonic picture of God.⁹

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Besides, I really do think this picture is mistaken. I assume that, typically, God knows something is happening because it is happening, and not the other way round. God knows what is happening in my body because it is happening

⁹ Another Incarnation-based objection to this Platonic view of God is that in taking on humanity, God the Son underwent some sort of change. (Senor (1990) defends this objection; Leftow (2002) responds.)

there. Moreover, God knows that when particular experiences in my body are caused in particular ways, certain things are happening in the world around that body. Thus, God knows about goings-on in the world because of events in my body. (Of course, God also knows about those goings-on directly.) So it seems that events in my body cause knowledge of the world in each person of the Trinity. At any rate, it is hard to see a principled way of ruling out causation in this case without thereby ruling out something to which the Christian dualist is committed—events in the body of Jesus causing knowledge in God the Son.

Objection 3: A body does not deliver only *propositional* knowledge to its soul. A body also provides *sensory experiential* knowledge. Such knowledge—for example, knowledge of what it is like to see a red-tailed hawk—essentially involves sensory experience, which in turn essentially involves having a body (cf. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a.77.8). God the Father and God the Spirit, lacking bodies, lack sensory experiential knowledge. God the Son, however, has sensory experiential knowledge. And we can parlay this knowledge into a way in which the Son is uniquely related to the body of Jesus, a way that at least partly constitutes the Son's having that body.

Reply: Dualists typically endorse the possibility of my having no body, yet everything's seeming to me just as it actually does. (Thus begins Descartes's famous argument for dualism in the *Meditations*.) And so dualists typically think that, possibly, a disembodied immaterial being has sensory experiences. As a result, dualists should say that such a being can have experiential knowledge and, therefore, they should not endorse the above objection.

Besides, presumably, the omniscient God's knowledge of creation is not far poorer than ours. And so, presumably, each person of the Trinity knows, for example, what a red-tailed hawk looks like and what *Eine kleine Nachtmusik* sounds like. Indeed, insofar as we dare speculate on such a thing, I would say that God's knowledge is so rich that each divine person knows what it is like to have your body, what it is like to have the body of Jesus, and even what it is like to be a bat.

Objection 4: It was a mistake to focus on sensory experiential *knowledge*. Let's consider, instead, sensory *experiences* (cf. Cross 2003: 301). To see the distinction, consider that you may not now see anything red, though you nevertheless now know what it is like to see red. Seeing red is one thing; knowing what it is like to see red is another. In general, it is one thing to know what an experience is like and quite another to have that experience.

To have a body is to have sensory experiences caused by that body. For example, if a body's eyes are open and a sheet of red paper is held in front of it, then that body may cause "its soul" to see red, and to see it "from the perspective of" that body. God the Son's experiences are caused in this way by exactly the body of Jesus and no other. (God the Father and God the Spirit may not have sensory experiences, and even if they do, their experiences are not caused by a body.)

Reply: This reply makes embodiment a matter of a body's actually causing a person to have experiences. And so it implies that whenever one is not having experiences caused by a body, one is not embodied. But I object that my body's failing to cause experiences in me should not render me disembodied. My soul might leave my body when I die, but not when I dreamlessly sleep! Moreover, lack of experiences caused by a body should not even result in my being somewhat less embodied. To repeat an earlier point, embodiment does not wax and wane with changes of the sort we encounter every day. Thus I conclude that embodiment is not even partly a matter of a body's actually causing experiences in a soul. (Presumably, embodiment is instead a precondition for having experiences caused by a body.)¹⁰

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Kenosis and Embodiment

The most familiar and straightforward dualistic account of embodiment says that to have a body is to have direct control over, and epistemic access to, that body. But this account stumbles over theism and the Incarnation. So let's consider another account.

Suppose that standing in the relevant relations of control and access to a body is not what it is to have that body. Rather, the dualist might say, to have a body is both to stand in those relations to that body and *to fail to stand in those relations to any other body*. Embodiment, thus understood, is not merely a matter of being "positively" related to a body. It is also a matter of being appropriately limited. It is a matter of lacking control over, and epistemic access to, any other body.

The Father and the Spirit, being omnipotent and omniscient, are not appropriately limited. That is, they stand in the relevant relations of control and epistemic access to each and every body. So this "revised account of embodiment" keeps the Father and Spirit from having bodies. But—by the same token—it robs the Son of his body.

¹⁰ Let me address a couple of the most obvious strategies for tweaking Objection 4 in light of my reply. One strategy says that having a body is a matter of the *ability* to have experiences caused by that body. I object that this would give the Father, the Spirit, and the Son each and every body, since each divine person, being omnipotent, is able to have experiences caused by any body he chooses.

A second strategy says that a soul's having a body is a matter of that soul's being such that, were that body in such and such a condition, then that soul would have thus and so experience. (Arguably, even when unconscious, the nearest counterfactual situation in which my body is in sense-experience-causing conditions is also one in which I have the corresponding experiences.) But, I object, whether one is embodied ought to be a matter of how things actually are, not a matter of how they would be, had things gone differently. Moreover, consider a disembodied soul, whose former body has died. If that body were in sense-experience-causing conditions—conditions presumably requiring it to be alive—then I suppose the soul would have the appropriate experiences. After all, the nearest counterfactual situation in which, for example, Lincoln's body is now alive is presumably, given dualism, a situation in which Lincoln's soul is embodied. But this should not imply—as it seems to given this second strategy—that Lincoln's disembodied soul now has a body.

More carefully, this revised account robs the Son of his body if he too is omnipotent and omniscient. But suppose the Incarnation involved a “kenosis”. According to Gottfried Thomasius—whose *Person and Work of Christ* (1852–61) contains the first explicit defense of a kenosis—Christ abandoned his divine attributes from birth until resurrection (see McGrath 2001: 377–8). Given a kenosis, the revised account of embodiment might allow the Son to have a body. For, given a kenosis, the Son might stand in the relevant relations of control and epistemic access to only the body of Jesus.

Without a kenosis, the revised account makes it impossible for the Son to have a body. So, given that the Son came to have the body of Jesus, one cost of the revised account is a kenosis. I shall not raise any objections to a kenosis.¹¹ Nevertheless, I have three objections to the revised account of embodiment.

The revised account implies that no omnipotent and omniscient person can have a body.¹² Given a kenosis, the Lord emptied himself of omniscience and omnipotence at birth and regained these attributes at resurrection. Thus the revised account, combined with a kenosis, has the comic and absurd implication that, upon the resurrection of his body, the Son became disembodied. This—along with the revised account’s implying that the Son is forevermore disembodied—is the first reason to reject the revised account.

Suppose a soul starts with a single body and then acquires the appropriate control over and knowledge via a second body, which results in the soul’s having two bodies. This idea—one soul’s having two bodies—seems possible. Yet the revised account of embodiment renders that idea impossible. (According to that account, a soul has a body if and only if that soul stands in the relevant relations to that body and *fails to stand in those relations to any other body.*) This is the second reason that the dualist should reject the revised account.

The revised account allows the Father to be related to the body of Jesus in each and every way that the Son is, while insisting that the Son, but not the Father, has that body. (According to that account, the Father does not have that body because of how he is related to other bodies.) But, I object, the union of a person and a body ought to be wholly a matter of their relations to each other, not instead partly a matter of how they fail to be related to other things. The revised account does not respect this. This is the third reason to reject that account.

¹¹ The most serious objection to a kenosis says that to be divine just is to have the appropriate array of divine attributes; to shed those attributes is to thereby shed divinity; thus a kenotic Christology denies the Lord’s divinity. (One possible reply is that divinity requires only attributes such as being-omniscient-unless-freely-and-temporarily-choosing-to-be-otherwise; cf. Morris 1986: 99 ff.)

¹² That is, such a person cannot have a body *if more than one body exists*. If exactly one body exists, then such a person can have a body. Indeed—given the revised account—that body will automatically be the body of every omnipotent and omniscient person. This result is another flaw in the account, since surely a divine person could create a world with one body without thereby becoming embodied.

Relations R and X

The dualist should reject the revised account of embodiment. So let's return to the original account. That account says that to have a body is to have direct control of, and to enjoy epistemic access to, that body. I have argued that the most obvious and plausible ways of spelling out *direct control* and *epistemic access*, when combined with the dualist's account of embodiment, get the "wrong results". (The wrong results include, among others, your and my lacking bodies when intending no actions and the Spirit's having each and every body for his own.) Of course, I have not examined every possible candidate for what control or access might amount to. And so one might fear that I have overlooked a candidate that gets "all the right results".

So, for the sake of argument, let's grant that there is a relation—call it 'Relation R'—that gets all the right results. That is, R holds between God the Son and only the body of Jesus; R fails to hold between any body and any other divine person; R holds between each of us and exactly each of our respective bodies; and, finally, R is intuitively embodiment-constituting because it is a kind of direct control, a kind of epistemic access, or a combination of both.

Suppose that R, which is an embodiment-constituting relation, holds between the Son and the body of Jesus alone. Even so, the moral of the paper so far is that many more embodiment-constituting relations hold between the Son and each and every body. Thus the dualist cannot say both that God the Son is fully and completely embodied in the body of Jesus and also that God the Son has no other body at all, without qualification. At best, even granting relation R, the Son might be "slightly more embodied" in the body of Jesus than he is in your body or in my body or in a teacup. But that's not good enough. (Moreover, even granting R, the Father and the Spirit are only "slightly less embodied" than you or I.)

This objection presupposes that embodiment is a cluster of relations, only one of which is relation R. The dualist might, however, reject this presupposition. She might say, instead, that embodiment *just is* relation R. Since we have stipulated that R gets "all the right results", this account of embodiment gets the right results as well.

We don't yet know what relation R is, other than that it will be some variety of direct control and/or epistemic access. Insofar as we do not know what R is, then—given the identification of R with embodiment—we do not know what embodiment is. Thus this suggestion renders embodiment somewhat mysterious.

Moreover, until we know more about R, we have no reason to think that R is intrinsically any more suited to be *the* embodiment relation than any other relation of epistemic access or direct control. The claim that R just is embodiment therefore privileges, in an ad hoc manner, exactly one out of many relations, all of which intuitively constitute embodiment. It would be better to take R as a crucial ingredient of embodiment than to take it to be the whole shooting match.

The dualist might deny that embodiment is reduced to, or analyzed in terms of, any apparently embodiment-constituting relations, including R. That is, she might deny that embodiment is analyzed in terms of any relation of direct control or epistemic access. She might say, rather, that embodiment is a primitive, unanalyzable relation that holds between a person and a body. This too would allow the dualist who believes in the Incarnation to get all the “right results”, simply by *fiat*.

But this move, even more than the previous, renders embodiment an occult relation. For once we make this move, then we do not know what the dualist means when she says that each of us “has a body”. (She does not mean that we have direct control of a body; she does not mean that we have epistemic access to a body; she does not mean that we have a combination of control over and access to a body . . .). To simply assert that embodiment is some “relation X” makes embodiment completely mysterious and so is utterly implausible.

Moreover, for all we have said so far, it is possible for me to stand in all the seemingly relevant control and epistemic relations to a body without being X-related to it. Conversely, I could be X-related to a body without being related to it by any control or epistemic relations. *Ex hypothesi*, something is my body if and only if I am X-related to it. And so—at least for all we have said so far—my body might be, for example, the one typically believed to belong to Queen Elizabeth II, the body now in Buckingham Palace. But no account of embodiment should make it possible for that to be my body and not that of Her Majesty, given that HM has (and I lack) causal control over, and epistemic access to, that body.

The defender of relation X could embellish her account to rule out such absurdities. She could insist that although X is not reduced to the relevant relations of control and access, each of these relations—including R, so that we get the cases right—is necessary for X’s holding and all of them together are sufficient.

Embellishing the X-account in this way has three advantages. First, there is no chance I have the Queen’s body. Second, if X supervenes on relations of control and access, it may not be so mysterious after all. Finally, this account allows one to deny that embodiment comes in degrees. And so its defenders can resist some of my earlier objections. To take just one example, even if God the Father is related to my body by every apparently embodiment-constituting relation except for R, it is false—given the embellished X-account—that there is a degree to which he *has* my body.

Let’s focus on this third advantage. The embellished X-account tells us that a soul, standing in all the relevant relations to a body except for R, is absolutely disembodied. This raises the troubling thought that—even though I control a body through which I have knowledge of the world—I might actually be disembodied. This troubling thought is a mere symptom of the real problem. The real problem is that this account puts too much weight on R.

This account says that a soul related to a body by every relevant relation of epistemic access and control except for R is totally disembodied. But I reply that, if I am a soul related to a body by all the relevant relations save R, then surely I am embodied to a significant degree, though perhaps not as embodied as other slightly more plugged-in souls. The X-account—even when embellished—is not plausible. And, besides, we have no reason to think that there really is any relation R, any apparently embodiment-constituting relation that really does get “all the right results.”¹³

FN:13

Embodiment and Incarnation

For sake of argument, let’s assume that the dualist can handle the objections above. Let’s assume, in particular, that she can account for the Son’s having exactly the body of Jesus. Even so, I shall argue, the Incarnation casts doubt on dualism.

This second Incarnation-based objection to dualism begins by considering “Apollinarianism”. Here is how Peter van Inwagen describes this heresy:

Apollinarianism (after Apollinarius (c.310–c.390)) holds that Christ did not have a human mind or spirit or rational soul—that he lacked something that is essential to human nature—and that God or some ‘aspect’ of God (such as the divine *logos*) was united to the human body of Jesus of Nazareth in such a way as to ‘be a substitute for’ or perform the function of the human mind or soul or spirit. (1998: 727)

Regarding the heresy of monophysitism, Swinburne says:

Monophysitism, holding that the Incarnate Christ had only one nature, normally understood that to be the divine nature. . . He had a human body; and the connection with [that body] that leads to the sensory desires—pain, thirst, etc. So this is not Docetism, the view that Christ’s body was mere ‘appearance’ and Christ did not really suffer. But it is what the century before Chalcedon knew as Apollinarianism, the view that the Incarnation consisted in the Word of God acquiring a human body but not a ‘rational soul’. (1994: 224)

With all this in mind, let us turn to:

The Heretical Theory: God the Son is fully divine. But he is not fully human. Nevertheless, ever since the virgin conception and birth over two thousand years ago, he has been related to the body of Jesus just as a normal human soul is related to its body. So God the Son controls the body of Jesus.

¹³ Some dualists believe that an embodied person is a composite of soul and body. Their resources for accounting for when a soul and body are thus united—for when a soul and body are related by *composing a person*—are no different from those of the standard dualist. (Indeed, Swinburne, whose account of the union of soul and body has been our touchstone, holds that a person is composed of soul and body; see Swinburne 1986: 146.) So this sort of dualism provides no way around the arguments above.

Moreover, he knows what happens in and around that body. He even has experiences such as hunger and pain and seeing red caused by that body.

Arguing that this or that metaphysics of the Incarnation is heretical can be tricky business (cf. Plantinga 1999). Nevertheless, it is safe to say that the Heretical Theory is aptly named. For the Heretical Theory explicitly asserts that God the Son is not fully human. This is a failure of doctrine. It is not, however, a failure of logic. That is, there is nothing incoherent in the claim that a non-human divine person is related to a human body in the ways a normal soul is related to its body. God the Son could “play the role” with respect to a body that, according to dualism, is typically played by a human soul, and the Son could do this without thereby becoming human.

So one moral of the Heretical Theory is that having a body, as understood by the dualist, is not sufficient for being human. Nor would it seem to be necessary. For dualists typically allow that you and I can continue to exist—and continue to be human—after our body dies, even before resurrection. Thus, given dualism, having a human body seems to be neither necessary nor sufficient for being human.¹⁴

FN:14

The Incarnation is the Son’s becoming human. Given dualism, this cannot be a matter of the Son’s coming to have a human body. So the dualist must say that the Son, in addition to coming to have a body, also became human. I suppose that, for the dualist, to be human is to be a human soul. So the dualist must claim that the Son, while remaining divine, became a human soul.

It is neither incoherent nor obviously heretical to say that God the Son’s becoming human just is his becoming a human soul. But I would prefer an account of the Incarnation according to which the Son’s coming to have a human body is at least a necessary condition for his becoming human. Dualism, as we have seen, is not such an account. Dualism makes the Son’s becoming human one thing and his becoming embodied something else altogether. This is my second Incarnation-based objection to dualism.

Besides, whether or not embodiment is absolutely necessary for the Incarnation, God the Son does have the body of Jesus. And the fact that the Son has a body—and the Father and the Spirit do not—undermines the standard dualistic account of embodiment, a straightforward account in terms of knowledge and control. Given theism and the Incarnation, the dualist must exchange the straightforward account for something or other *ad hoc* or implausible or darkly mysterious. (Among the unattractive options are that embodiment turns completely on “relation R” and that embodiment wanes when sleeping.) This, of course, was my first, and more important, Incarnation-based objection to dualism.

In light of this objection, one could conclude that Christians should be dualists who defend one or another *ad hoc* or implausible or darkly mysterious

¹⁴ This is not surprising. Dualistic embodiment is a matter of causal relations that one bears to something contingently, to something not identical with oneself. It would be odd if one’s very humanity were a matter of such relations.

claim about embodiment. Similarly, in light of my second objection, one could conclude that the Son could have become human without ever having a body. But, rather than jump to these conclusions, I suggest that we consider another approach altogether.

2. PHYSICALISM

It seems pretty obvious that you have physical properties. You have a height and a weight; you take up space; you have a shape. But only physical objects have physical properties. For to be a physical object just is to be a thing that has physical properties.¹⁵ Given all this, it seems pretty obvious that *physicalism*—the claim that each of us is a physical object—is true.

(Not everyone will agree. Dualists do not think it is obvious that we have physical properties. Indeed, dualists think we lack such properties. For each of us, according to the dualist, is a soul. And souls have no physical properties. Souls have neither height nor weight, shape nor size.)

Physicalism says that we are physical objects. Consider the human-shaped object sitting in your chair and wearing your clothes.¹⁶ Let's call that human-shaped and living and breathing object 'your body'. The sort of physicalism I defend says that you are identical with your body (see Merricks 2001*a*). That is, you are that human-shaped thing sitting in your chair and wearing your clothes. You just are that living, breathing organism.

Physicalism has a straightforward account of embodiment. You have a body if and only if you are identical with that body. I assume that, in the Incarnation, God the Son is related to the body of Jesus just as you and I are related to our respective bodies. So, given physicalism, God the Son, in the Incarnation, is identical with the body of Jesus. That is, in becoming human, he became a body.

Some might object that saying that God the Son became a physical object is deeply inappropriate. Some might object that this is akin to saying that that which spoke the universe into existence is a mere doorstep or a lace doily. But, I reply, to say that the Son became a physical object is just to say that he came to have physical properties. Saying that God the Son became a physical object is no more impious than saying that God came to be such that we could literally touch and see him. The only scandal here is that of the Incarnation itself.

Moreover, the claim that God the Son is identical with the body of Jesus does not mean that God the Son is *merely* a physical object, in the sense that his only

¹⁵ More carefully, to be a physical object is to have physical properties *and fail to have a non-physical object (like a soul) as a part*. If we were composed of both a body and a soul, we would have physical properties, but would not be physical objects. But, as already noted, there are good reasons to set aside the view according to which we are composites of soul and body. So I set it aside.

¹⁶ I say there is exactly one such object. Below we shall note a version of physicalism according to which more than one such object exists, each wholly co-located with the others.

properties are physical. Indeed, the physicalist need not say that any human person, divine or otherwise, is merely a physical object. For while the physicalist says that a human person has physical properties, she does not insist that a human person has only physical properties. Persons also have mental properties. And physicalism, as I shall understand it, is consistent with a physical person's mental properties' being *sui generis*, being irreducible to physical properties.¹⁷ (Thus my sort of physicalism is consistent with "property dualism" about the mental.) Moreover, for all I know, we might have properties that are neither mental nor physical. And the same goes for the incarnate Son. *Being the Lord of Glory* is not obviously a mental property, but it is a safe bet that it is not a physical property either.

[FN:17]

The claim that human persons are physical organisms is consistent with a variety of views about mental properties. It is also consistent with a variety of views about the further details of human nature. Consider, for example, Aquinas's view. He denied that a human person is a soul that interacts with a numerically distinct body (see *Summa Contra Gentiles*, II.57). Indeed, according to Aquinas, the substantial form of the person is identical with the substantial form of the person's living body (*Summa Theologica*, Ia.76). And so, according to (at least one way of reading) Aquinas, a human person in this life is identical with a living body. And that is physicalism.¹⁸

[FN:18]

Alvin Plantinga says:

Consider again the doctrine of the Incarnation, that characteristic and nonnegotiable Christian teaching according to which the second person of the Trinity became Incarnate and dwelt among us. As I understand the scripture and the creeds (Nicene, Athanasian, the Chalcedonian formulation), this involves the second person of the Trinity's actually becoming human. The Logos became a human being, acquiring the property necessary and sufficient for being human. Prior to the Incarnation, however, the second person of the Trinity was not a material object, but an immaterial being. If, however, as materialists assert, to be a human being is to be a material object, then the second person of the Trinity must have become a material object. If he has remained a human being, furthermore, he is presently a material object. But then an immaterial being became a material object; and this seems to me to be impossible. It is clearly impossible, I'd say, that the number seven or the proposition that $7 + 5 = 12$, or the property of self-exemplification, all of which are immaterial objects, should become, turn into, material objects. It is less clearly impossible, but still impossible, it seems to me, that the second person of the Trinity—that personal being with will and intellect and affection—should turn into a material object. (1999: 186)

¹⁷ Moreover, the physicalism here is physicalism about *human persons*, saying only that we humans are physical; it does not say that everything is physical.

¹⁸ Physicalism suggests that a person does not exist between death and resurrection. But perhaps a physical person—a human organism—could become non-physical (and presumably non-human) at death and continue to exist in such a state until becoming physical again at resurrection. This seems to be Eleonore Stump's (2002) understanding of Aquinas's view. I think Aquinas can also be read as saying that the person does not exist between death and resurrection, but only the person's substantial form (see objection 5 and his reply in *Summa Theologica* IIaIIae.83.11).

Plantinga focuses on the physicalist's account of *being human*. But I have been concerned with her account of *having a body*. (I shall address physicalism and *being human* below.) Nevertheless, if Plantinga is right that a non-physical person cannot possibly become physical, then the physicalist's account of embodiment rules out the Son's coming to have the body of Jesus.

Brian Leftow considers the version of physicalism, according to which “. . . the body just *is* the person. On this version, the Son owns [body] B only if the Son *becomes* B; only if an immaterial item becomes material.” Like Plantinga, Leftow says: “This does not seem possible” (2002: 284). So, like Plantinga, Leftow thinks that physicalism rules out the Son's coming to have a body.¹⁹

FN:19

“Kind-essentialism” says that if something is a member of a natural kind, then it is essentially a member of that kind. Presumably, physical objects constitute a natural kind. And so, given kind-essentialism, physical objects are essentially physical objects. Nothing can start out lacking an *essential* property and then later acquire it. Given all this, kind-essentialism implies that something that starts out as a non-physical object cannot possibly become a physical object. In this way, kind-essentialism threatens the physicalist's account of the Incarnation.

Presumably, human souls would constitute a natural kind. Recall that dualists must say that God the Son became a human soul, though he did not start out that way. Thus kind-essentialism also undermines dualistic Incarnation. Indeed, kind-essentialism undermines the Incarnation on any view. For surely if there are natural kinds, human beings constitute one. Kind-essentialism therefore says that *being human* is an essential property of all humans. But God the Son became human, though he did not start out that way.

Believers in the Incarnation must reject kind-essentialism. Once kind-essentialism is rejected, it is hard to see why the non-physical God the Son could not become a physical human organism.²⁰ Perhaps this is the sort of thing that might not seem possible merely upon reflection, given no relevant revelation. But the same thing goes for God the Son's becoming human. This is the mystery.

FN:20

¹⁹ It is odd that Leftow thinks that the Incarnation is inconsistent with a normal human person's being identical with a body. For Leftow (2002) endorses a picture of the Incarnation according to which the Son is *not* related to the body of Jesus like each of us is to our own bodies. (So Leftow rejects the assumption that opens this paper.) Thus—given Leftow's view of the Incarnation—an ordinary human person's being identical with a body would not imply that the Son becomes identical with a body in the Incarnation. Moreover, Leftow (2001) himself seems to identify a person in this life with her body, supplementing this with a Thomistic theory of the nature of living human bodies.

²⁰ C. Stephen Evans rightly insists that we cannot say “the identity of Jesus as the Son of God is grounded in bodily continuity, since the incarnation is a change from a bodiless state to an embodied state” (2002: 269). Some might worry, however, that if we say that God the Son became identical with a human body, we are somehow committed to “a bodily theory of personal identity” that rules out his having existed without a body. But this worry is misplaced. Just so long as *being a body* is a contingent property of what has it, it is possible that that very thing—that very body—could have existed even though it was not a body. (Compare: I am identical with a professor; but this very thing—this very professor—could have existed (and did exist) without being a professor.)

Once we've accepted that possibility, we should accept whatever else comes along with it, including—if part of being human is having physical properties—the Son's coming to have physical properties, that is, coming to be a physical object.

The dualist might still resist. She might object that—even given the Incarnation—God the Son's becoming a human organism seems impossible while his becoming a human soul does not. Presumably, this objection presupposes that there is a “bigger difference” between the divine and (alleged) physical humans than there is between the divine and (alleged) non-physical humans. But, in reply, the difference between God the Son and each of us is staggering. The difference between a non-physical human person and a physical human person is comparatively trivial. If we believe that God the Son became a human being, we have swallowed the camel. To insist that God the Son could not possibly become a *physical* human is to strain out a gnat.

Once we accept the possibility of God the Son's becoming a human being, there remains no good objection to the possibility of his becoming a physical human being. So the Incarnation does not support dualism over physicalism. Quite the contrary. When it comes to the Incarnation, physicalism has two advantages over dualism.

To see the first advantage, recall that dualism—given its account of embodiment—has trouble making sense of God the Son's having exactly the body of Jesus. (It also had trouble affirming that the Father and the Spirit lack bodies.) But physicalism has no such trouble. Physicalism's account of embodiment is that a person has a body if and only if she is identical with that body. Given this account, we can easily state what it is for the Son to have exactly the body of Jesus: God the Son is identical with the body of Jesus and with no other. (And since neither the Father nor the Spirit is identical with a body, the physicalist's account of embodiment tells us that neither has a body.)

To see physicalism's second advantage over dualism, recall that the dualist says that *to be human* is *to be a human soul*. And so dualism makes Christ's becoming human (that is, the Incarnation) one thing, but his becoming embodied something else. But it would be nice to have an account of the Incarnation that required Christ to become incarnate. And we can have such an account, given physicalism. The most straightforward account says that *to be human* just is *to be a human organism*. Christ's becoming human and his coming to have a body—his becoming incarnate—would then be one and the same thing.

There may, however, be a problem with this most straightforward account. To begin to see this potential problem, consider Gregory of Nazianzus's famous anti-Apollinarian remark:

If anyone has put their trust in [Christ] as a human being lacking a human mind, they are themselves mindless and not worthy of salvation. For what has not been assumed has not been healed; it is what is united to his divinity that is saved. . . . Let them not grudge

us our total salvation, or endue the Saviour only with the bones and nerves and mere appearance of humanity. (Quoted in McGrath 2001: 362)

The chief objection to Apollinarianism is soteriological. To fully redeem humanity, Christ must be fully human. He must not be merely physically human—as the Apollinarians said—but also mentally human. (I think this is the point of the creedal insistence that Christ has a “rational soul” (see Kelly 1978: 296–7).) The moral of all this, for our purposes, is that being a human organism—even a human organism with mental properties—might not be sufficient for being “mentally human”, for having a “human mind”. And if it is not, then the claim that *to be human* just is *to be a human organism* is simply false.

Suppose, for the sake of argument, that being a human organism with mental properties is insufficient for having a human mind. (Presumably, being a human soul with mental properties is also insufficient.) Then the physicalist should say that having a human mind requires thinking in certain ways, having various experiences, and so on (cf. Swinburne 1994: 208). She should say, that is, that to have a human mind is *to be a human organism with a certain sort of mental life*.

The physicalist might say that to be human is simply to be a human organism (with mental properties). Or, instead, the physicalist might say that to be human is to be a human organism with a certain sort of mental life. Either way, physicalism makes becoming identical with (and so having) a body necessary for becoming human. Either way, according to physicalism, the Incarnation—that is, the Son’s becoming human—requires his becoming embodied. I say that the Incarnation should be dependent on God the Son’s becoming embodied. So, I say, we have another point in favor of physicalism over dualism, since dualism implies the possibility of the Incarnation without embodiment.

I have been treating physicalism as the claim that each human person is identical with a human organism. But a better (and more inclusive) definition of ‘physicalism’ might be that each human person is a physical object, though not necessarily a human organism. Thus construed, physicalism of course rules out dualism. But it is consistent with a wide range of views. It is consistent with—but does not entail—our being organisms. It is consistent with our being brains. It is consistent with each of us being co-located (but not identical) with a living human body (cf. Baker 2000). And so on.

Each of these versions of physicalism has its own account of embodiment. According to one, a person has a body if and only if she is a (brain that is) part of a human body. According to another, a person has a body if and only if she is co-located with a body. And so on. These accounts of embodiment have none of dualism’s problems with Christ’s having exactly one body or with the other divine persons having none. For nothing in the omniscience or omnipotence of God suggests, for example, that the persons of the Trinity are proper parts of, or are co-located with, each and every body. Moreover, defenders of each of these

accounts can insist that, to become human, Christ had to become a physical object of some sort and so had to become incarnate.

3. CONCLUSION

I assume that we are not events or properties, but rather objects or things or substances. Given that we are objects of some sort, there is no question that we are objects with *mental* properties; obviously we are. The only real question is whether we are objects with *physical* properties. If we are, we are physical objects. If we are not, we are non-physical objects. Given that we are objects of some sort, the only options are physicalism and dualism.²¹

FN:21

Our options are physicalism and dualism. Which are we to endorse? The Incarnation points us toward physicalism. For the physicalist, unlike the dualist, can insist that becoming embodied is necessary for becoming human; she can insist that the Incarnation requires the Son to become incarnate. Moreover, and more importantly, the physicalist—but not the dualist—can easily and straightforwardly account for God the Son’s having the body of Jesus and no other.

Of course, physicalism does not solve every puzzle or answer every question regarding the Incarnation. To take just one example, physicalism is silent on how to reconcile Christ’s divinity with his apparently not knowing the hour of his return (Matthew 24: 36). So physicalism is not a cure-all with respect to the Incarnation. Nevertheless, it does cure something, doing away with the embodiment ills brought on by dualism. This gives Christians a good reason to be physicalists.²²

FN:22

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²¹ A couple of points will clarify my hasty argument for “only physicalism or dualism”. (1) My argument ignores the option of our being composites of soul and body. But since that option just is a form of dualism, that option is consistent with the argument’s conclusion, and with the points to follow in this section of the paper. (2) Somewhat misleadingly, I would (in the context of this paper) classify idealism as a form of dualism. For given idealism, we are mental entities that have no physical properties. Given idealism, having a body will presumably be a matter of being associated in the right ways with the relevant ideas. I suspect that, however the “right ways” are cashed out, this will mimic what the standard substance dualist says about embodiment. And so I suspect that idealism is vulnerable to this paper’s objections to dualism.

²² The hope for eternal life, which in scripture is often expressed in terms of hope for the resurrection of the body, gives Christians another good reason to be physicalists (see Merricks 1999; see also Merricks, 2001*b*).

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