



## A Dilemma in Pawline Christology

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### Abstract

Research Article



A longstanding problem confronting Christian theology and its doctrine of incarnation is the apparent contradiction that it faces. For example, to be divine, in the relevant sense, is to have the limitlessness of God. To be human, in the relevant sense, is to have the limitations of humans. The incarnation (in the person of Jesus per Christian doctrine) is to be both divine and human. Many theologians and sympathetic philosophers have attempted to ‘consistentize’ (i.e., make consistent) incarnation. Timothy Pawl has been one of the latest to do so. In this paper, I concisely note a dilemma for Pawl’s approach.

### Keywords

Christology, Incarnation, Contradiction, Timothy Pawl.

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Received: 2023/06/21 ; Received in revised form: 2023/07/03 ; Accepted: 2023/07/10 ; Published online: 2023/07/13

▣ Beall, Jc. (2023). A Dilemma in Pawline Christology. *Journal of Philosophical Theological Research*, (Special Issue on "Comparative Philosophy of Religion"), 25(3), 55-62. <https://doi.org/10.22091/jptr.2023.9856.2941>

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## Introduction

The so-called fundamental problem of Christology – famously so called by Richard Cross (2011) – is the apparent contradiction(s) of Christ, who is both divine and human, and so has all the limitlessness entailed by being (really, truly, genuinely) divine but all limitations of being (really, truly, genuinely) human. As some of the ecumenical councils put it:

- Christ is mutable (because Christ is truly human).
- Christ is immutable (because Christ is truly divine).

By logic, Christ is mutable and immutable, and hence it's true that Christ is mutable and it's false that Christ is mutable. Contradiction.

The standard response to the fundamental problem is a quest to 'consistentize' Christ – to give a logically consistent but theologically orthodox account of Christ.<sup>1</sup> A large variety of attempts to consistentize Christ exists, many seeking consistency via metaphysical constructions, some epistemological constructions, and some seeking consistency via new semantical constructions, and some a combination of such approaches.

A recent and now prominent approach is that of Timothy Pawl (2016).<sup>2</sup> The Pawline approach, as it's sometimes called, posits a nonstandard semantical construction (viz., nonstandard satisfaction conditions for all predicates), a construction that dissolves the *prima facie* contradictions at the heart of the fundamental problem. (An example is given in §2 below.)

In other works (2020; 2021), I advance various objections against the Pawline approach towards consistentizing Christ. The aim of this paper is not to repeat the given objections; it is to highlight a fundamental dilemma.<sup>3</sup>

### The basic Pawline approach: a thumbnail

Pawline Christology – 'Conciliar Christology', as Pawl defines it – contains all

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1. Said orthodoxy requires that Christ be exactly one person who is divine, and so God, but who is human – really, truly human, just like us. Familiar Christological heresies are officially church-rejected attempts to consistentize Christ.
  2. And for a concise survey of the wide variety of other attempts to consistentize Christ see Pawl's *Incarnation* (2020).
  3. A virtue of Pawl's work is its high standard of rigor, a standard that allows for precise results about theology. The current paper should not be seen as a *philosophical objection*; it is a straightforward result of Pawline Christology as it currently stands.

claims about Christ endorsed in the first seven ecumenical councils.<sup>1</sup> Pawline Christology not only purports to be orthodox (as measured by said seven councils); it purports to be closed under so-called classical logic.<sup>2</sup> As such, and as Pawl's work makes clear, the fundamental problem is urgent, as the claims of Christ's mutability and immutability don't just seem to be true given standard entailments from 'divine' and 'human'; they are explicit in said Conciliar statements. Accordingly, the claims:

- C1. Christ is mutable.
- C2. Christ is immutable.

are in the theory (i.e., Conciliar Christology), that is, in the Pawline theological theory, understood as a theory of theological reality. But the satisfaction conditions *standardly* advanced for such predicates immediately entail contradiction:

- S1.  $x$  is mutable iff  $x$  is able to change.
- S2.  $x$  is immutable iff  $x$  is unable to change.<sup>3</sup>

What follows from the above is not only

- !C. Christ is able to change and Christ is unable to change.

But given closure under classical logic, also *every* sentence in the language of the theology – that is, the *trivial* theology according to which every sentence in the language of the theory is true.<sup>4</sup> In short, the fundamental problem appears to reduce Conciliar Christology to the trivial theology, a theology that is not only logically absurd but theologically absurd (and deeply heretical). (If, as in the trivial case, a theology contains *all* sentences of the theological language – that is, all sentences in the language are true according to the theology – then it contains the claim that Christ is Satan, God loves evil, etc.)

The Pawline response to said fundamental problem points to an (alleged)

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1. What should be needless to say, *all claims about Christ (Son) in the first seven ecumenical councils* include all claims in the 'Nicene Creed' in its 'Niceno-Constantinopolitan' form (Pawl, 2016, p. 381).
  2. A theology (or, generally, theory) T is closed under classical logic iff every classical-logic consequence of T is in T (or, equivalently, true according to T).
  3. Throughout, ' $x$  is unable to change' is equivalent to 'it is false that  $x$  is able to change'.
  4. Classical logic validates the pattern from arbitrary contradiction  $A \wedge \neg A$  to arbitrary sentence  $B$ . Hence, classically closing a theory with even one contradiction in it puts all contradictions in the theory.

error in standard satisfaction conditions. Instead of S1 and S2, the true semantics has slightly different satisfaction conditions, namely,

- \* S1. *x* is mutable iff *x* has a concrete nature that is able to change.
- \* S2. *x* is immutable iff *x* has a concrete nature that is unable to change.

For present purposes, the central idea is that on Pawline semantics, predicates are satisfied by something in virtue of that something's 'concrete nature' (directly) satisfying the relevant condition.<sup>1</sup> As Pawl emphasizes, it's easy to overlook the (supposedly) correct semantics because, in general, just about everything has exactly one 'concrete nature'. The full truth about satisfaction conditions, according to Pawl, is highlighted by the fundamental problem: Christ is mutable and immutable because Christ has one concrete nature that can change and another (distinct) concrete nature that's unable to change.

Being a general and systematic account, Pawline semantics extends to *all* predicates of the language; otherwise, the account is conspicuously ad hoc.<sup>2</sup> The semantics may appear to be highly nonstandard but, per the Pawline account, appearances can be misleading; the full and correct satisfaction conditions collapse to the standard 'elliptical' (so to speak) conditions when and only when something has just one concrete nature.<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, the

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1. One may ask after details of 'concrete natures' and 'having' such things, but I leave Pawl's extensive and detailed work to answer (Pawl, 2016; 2019). The dilemma can be seen without such details.
  2. Surprisingly, Pawl himself (2016) accepts that the proposal is not a general one and is ad hoc. This is surprising to those many who took the account to be a general one. Pawl points to 'cheap predicates' like 'is two-natured' or the like, which he claims do not have the 'starred semantics' (so to speak). By my lights, this is truly a major problem for the Pawline account: it's not only apparently ad hoc in its nonstandard semantics; the semantics truly are ad hoc. (Pawl might claim that this is so of any semantics. Such a claim demands argument. Consider, for example, that even apparent major differences between so-called extensional predicates and non-extensional (or 'modal') predicates are easily accommodated under uniform, general satisfaction conditions; the difference is only in 'accessibility' relations, etc. (For readers unfamiliar with the distinction, nothing significant is lost. The point is there only to answer what might be an obvious response. In any event, I leave further discussion – and especially the weight of the critically important theological predicate 'begotten' – to future debate. The target dilemma, in the end, is for those who think of the Pawline strategy as non-ad-hoc and viable, even if Pawl himself is not among them. (Thanks to Tim Pawl for discussion.)
  3. So that the semantics is general over all predicates, Pawl tweaks the 'has a concrete nature' to 'either has or is', so as to let the many 'concrete natures' themselves 'have (or be)' concrete natures, etc. Again, readers unfamiliar with Pawl's extensive work will find in said work answers to the most relevant questions about it.

initial appearance of radical semantic shenanigans is merely apparent. (Or so goes the basic idea.)

My aim is not to rehearse more of Pawline semantics or Pawline Christology generally. There is a lot of work that does that job (Pawl, 2016; 2019; 2020). My aim is only to highlight a fundamental dilemma; I leave revisions of Pawline theology to advocates thereof.

### The dilemma in Pawline Christology

Consider the following fundamental Christological claim (from Niceno-Constantinople Creed):

1) Christ is begotten.

On the Pawline account, the satisfaction conditions for all predicates – ergo for ‘begotten’ – are per the \*S1-\*S2 pattern in §2, namely, where, just for convenience,

... B ...

is necessary and sufficient for being begotten,

2)  $x$  is *begotten* iff  $x$  has a concrete nature which is ... B ...

Given that Son’s *begotten-ness* is eternal, another fundamental Christological claim is the orthodox falsity of Christ’s ‘concrete human nature’ being ... B ...:

3) It is false that Christ’s concrete human nature is ... B ...<sup>1</sup>

But another fundamental theological truth, in addition to (1) and (3), is

4) It is false that Father is begotten, which, given (2), entails

5) It is false that Father has a concrete nature which is ... B ...

The dilemma arises with one other fundamental truth:

6) Father has exactly one concrete nature (viz., the unique divine nature) and Christ also has that nature.

The upshot of (1)–(6) is that *either* (7) or (8) is true:

7) It is true and false that the concrete divine nature (i.e., the unique ‘concretenature’ had by both Father and Christ) is ... B ...

1. For but one reminder of the eternity of Christ’s *begotten-ness*, witness the Nicene Creed:

... in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, *begotten of Father before all worlds*; God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, being of one substance with Father, by whom all things were made ... [Italics mine]

In short, the eternity of Christ’s *being begotten* is not (to use Pawline language) in virtue of Christ’s ‘human concrete nature’; it concerns Christ’s divinity.

8) At least one of (1), (3), (4) and (6) is false.

This is a fundamental dilemma in Pawline theology. The Pawline theory collapses into the trivial theology either way. (7) is logically incoherent in Pawline theology; (8) is theologically incoherent in Pawline theology. As in §2, Pawline theology is closed under so-called classical logic (and, hence, collapses to the trivial theology in the face of contradiction); and the broader Pawline theology is fundamentally tied to orthodox doctrine – of which (1), (3), (4) and (5) are *all* axiomatic components.

### **Closing remarks**

My aim is not to chart potential responses to said dilemma. My aim is only to highlight the given dilemma, which betrays a fundamental problem in the Pawline program (at least the program that purports to be a general, non-ad-hoc one): namely, that the theology, as it stands, is the trivial one.

As above, the principal aim of this paper is simply to highlight the given dilemma in Pawline Christology. Undoubtedly, either ad hoc restrictions or further scaffolding of semantic machinery can construct a revised Pawline Christology that avoids the given dilemma. My own view is that there is a better, non-semantic – and, for that matter, non-metaphysical and non-epistemological – response to Christological contradictions. But that is for other work.

### **Ethics declarations**

### **Conflict of interests**

The author has no competing interests.

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