

Flint's Radical Molinist Christology Not Radical Enough

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SUMMARY

In a pair of recent articles Thomas Flint has offered what he calls "some radical Molinist suggestions" for Christology. In the first of the pair, he argues that despite divine impeccability Christ's individual human nature had the freedom to sin, but that were it to do so, then Christ's individual human nature would not have been hypostatically united with the divine nature of the second person of the Trinity, that is to say, that individual human nature would have been a human person. God infallibly preserved the sinlessness of Christ's individual human nature by not permitting it to be placed in circumstances in which God knew that it would sin. In the second of his two articles Flint draws out some of the truly radical implications which seem to flow naturally from such a thesis. He argues, for example, that any one of our individual human natures, rather than Christ's, might have been hypostatically united with the second person of the Trinity. In this response I argue that Flint's Molinist Christological reflections do not constitute a viable approach to the problem of the freedom of Christ's human nature to sin. Nonetheless, I think his reflections do have the salutary effect of raising profound questions about how best to preserve the integrity of Christ's person within the context of a two natures Christology, questions which merit further exploration.

FLINT'S RADICAL MOLINIST CHRISTOLOGY NOT RADICAL ENOUGH

I.

In a pair of recent articles Thomas Flint has offered what he calls "some radical Molinist suggestions" for Christology. [1] In the first of the pair, published in this journal, he argues that despite Christ's impeccability his individual human nature (that body/soul composite that walked the hills of Galilee) had the freedom to sin, but that were it to do so, then Christ's individual human nature would not have been hypostatically united with the divine nature of the second person of the Trinity, that is to say, that individual human nature would have been a human person. God infallibly preserved the sinlessness of Christ's individual human nature by not permitting it to be placed in circumstances in which God knew that it would sin. [2] In the second of his two articles Flint draws out some of the truly radical implications which seem to flow naturally from such a thesis. He argues, for example, that any one of our individual human natures, rather than Christ's, might have been hypostatically united with the second person of the Trinity.

In this response I shall argue that Flint's Molinist Christological reflections do not constitute a viable approach to the problem of the freedom of Christ's human nature to sin. Nonetheless, I think his reflections do have the salutary effect of raising profound questions about how best to preserve the

integrity of Christ's person within the context of a two natures Christology, questions which merit further exploration.

II.

In his initial article, Flint argues, as mentioned, that Christ's individual human nature (CHN) had the freedom to sin, but that were it to do so, then CHN would not have been assumed by a divine person but would instead have been a human person. Flint's view is extraordinarily subtle. He is not claiming that Christ had the freedom to sin, for "Christ" refers to the person who, subsequent to the incarnation, possesses two natures, human and divine, and that person is the second person of the Trinity and therefore incapable of sinning. The idea, rather, is that Christ's individual human nature—which is not, contra Nestorianism, a person—had the freedom to sin and so could have been a person in its own right, a human person distinct from the second person of the Trinity, a person who would, like us, just *be* the body/soul composite that it, in fact, is.

In so arguing, however, Flint does not address an objection implicit in the earlier work of his colleague Alfred Freddoso and which threatens to undo Flint's entire scheme. [3] The operative question motivating Freddoso's Christological reflections is: Could CHN have possibly existed without being assumed by a divine person? Noting that medieval theologians were careful not to say that Christ is a human person—rather he is a divine person who has assumed a human nature—, Freddoso is asking, in effect, whether CHN could have been a human person.

He argues that this is, in fact, impossible. Noting that Scotus and Ockham held that God might at any time assume some individual human nature, Freddoso imagines a scenario according to which God assumes an already existing human nature *N* and after a time breaks off this union. Now Scotus and Ockham affirm (and Freddoso concurs) that before and after its assumption by God, *N* is identical to a human person, say, Socrates. But what happens to Socrates during *N*'s hypostatic union with the divine nature? What Christologically orthodox theologians cannot say is that the person who is Socrates continues to exist during the time of the assumption of Socrates' human nature by a divine person, for that would be to fall into the heresy of Nestorianism (affirming two persons or hypostases, one human and one divine, during the Incarnation). One answer is to say that Socrates ceased to exist during the period of *N*'s assumption and then resumed his existence thereafter. But this answer violates the law of the Indiscernibility of Identicals. For one may argue

1. *N* is identical with Socrates.
2. *N* has the property of being necessarily such that it exists when and only when *N* exists.
3. Therefore, Socrates has the property of being necessarily such that he exists when and only when *N* exists.

Hence, one must maintain that since Socrates is identical with *N*, he does exist throughout the time of *N*'s hypostatic union with the divine nature. But Socrates cannot be a human person during the time of *N*'s assumption. Obviously, Socrates could not have somehow become the divine person, for the divine person pre-existed the assumption of *N*, and such an apotheosis is both metaphysically impossible and smells of Adoptionism. Therefore, one is forced to embrace the answer that while Socrates continues to exist during *N*'s assumption, he ceases to be a person during that time. In short, Socrates is only contingently a person. But it is wildly counter-intuitive to maintain that a human person is only contingently a person.

Therefore, Freddoso concludes, we should embrace the following principle:

R. Necessarily, each individual human nature is either (a) necessarily such that it is a human person (and, hence, not assumed by a divine person), or (b) necessarily such that it is assumed by a divine person (and, hence, is not a human person).

In accord with (R) we must say, then, that CHN is necessarily not a human person and therefore cannot exist apart from its assumption by a divine person.

It is the implication of Freddoso's argument that it is metaphysically impossible that CHN should exist apart from its union with the Logos, the second person of the Trinity. It is worth noting that nothing essential to Freddoso's argument hangs upon the transitory character of God's assumption of some individual human nature, as envisioned by Scotus and Ockham. Even if such divine "body snatching" were impossible, so that an individual human nature must be either assumed by a divine person permanently throughout its lifetime or not at all, it would remain the case that some human nature which is identical to a human person might not have ever been a human person, since there are possible worlds in which that nature is from birth assumed by a divine person.

If Freddoso's argument is sound, it spoils Flint's thesis. Flint explains his position as follows:

... there is no possible world in which an assumed human nature sins. So, given that CHN is assumed, it follows with certainty that CHN does not sin. Still, CHN is able to sin. That is to say, CHN has access to worlds in which CHN sins. What follows, it seems clear, is that CHN has

access to worlds in which CHN is not assumed. That is to say, CHN has the power so to act that CHN never would have been assumed had it so acted. [4]

Clearly, if Freddoso's argument is correct, CHN cannot have access to worlds in which it is not assumed and, hence, to worlds in which CHN sins, for there are no such worlds. Furthermore, Flint's counterfactual "Had CHN so acted, it would never have been assumed" is then what Flint has elsewhere called a "collapsing counterfactual." [5] For the consequent clause is true only in worlds in which CHN does not exist; there is no world in which CHN exists without being assumed. But then the counterfactual's antecedent clause is false in all worlds in which CHN does not exist, for CHN cannot act in such a way if CHN does not exist. The counterfactual is thus self-defeating and cannot be true.

More specifically, consider Flint's counterfactual

4.' $(\sim A \& D^*) \Box \rightarrow S$,

where A stands for CHN's being assumed, D^* for a set of circumstances contingently implying CHN's sinning, and S for CHN's sinning. Notice that if Freddoso is correct, (4') has an impossible antecedent. Although such counterfactuals turn out to be trivially true on the customary Stalnaker-Lewis semantics, Freddoso is prepared to challenge those semantics and would allow that (4') could be non-trivially true and so part of God's middle knowledge, as Flint claims. [6] Suppose it were. Could it also be the case that

4. $D^* \Box \rightarrow S$

is not part of God's middle knowledge? Flint finds this "preposterous." [7] But on Freddoso's analysis, (4') could be true because there is no possible world in which CHN exists without being assumed and, hence, the conjunction of $\sim A$ and D^* is impossible. But (4) does not have an impossible antecedent. CHN would well be in circumstances D^* ; only in such circumstances it will be an assumed nature and so incapable of sinning. Hence, (4) will be false and so not part of God's middle knowledge. Furthermore, Flint's

P. Necessarily, if an individual human nature is assumed in freedom-retaining circumstances such that, had it been in those circumstances but not been assumed, it would have freely done x , then the individual human nature freely does x , [8]

when applied to CHN involves a counterfactual with an impossible antecedent, namely, *had CHN been in those circumstances but not been assumed*. Flint symbolizes (P) in application to his

example as

5. $\{ A \& D^* \& [(\sim A \& D^*) \Box \rightarrow S] \} \Box \rightarrow S$.

From (5) and

6. $(A \& D^*) \Box \rightarrow \sim S$,

he deduces

7. $\sim \Diamond \{ A \& D^* \& [(\sim A \& D^*) \Box \rightarrow S] \}$.

The problem is that the proposition symbolized by the operand in (7) evidently *is* possible on Freddoso's analysis, for it states that CHN is assumed and is in D^* and that a counterfactual about CHN with an impossible antecedent is true, all of which is unobjectionable. Since (6) is obviously true, (5) must be false. It is not the case that, necessarily, if CHN is assumed and is in D^* and a counterfactual about CHN with an impossible antecedent is true, then CHN sins. Thus, if Freddoso is right, Flint's argument is unsound.

Finally, Flint sees no merit in the claim that acknowledged truths like

3**. $(A \& D) \Box \rightarrow \sim S$,

point to CHN's lack of freedom in situations in which CHN is assumed by a divine person. For it is also true that

F. Were CHN to have sinned, CHN would not have been assumed. [9]

Given Christ's impeccability, Flint must take (F) to be necessarily true. The problem with this response is that it assumes that if CHN had not been assumed, it would have been a human person. But if Freddoso is correct, it is rather the case that, necessarily,

G. If CHN had not been assumed, CHN would not have existed.

For in no world is CHN a human person; hence in the closest worlds to the actual world in which the antecedent of (G) is true the consequent of (G) is also true. But since necessarily true counterfactuals reduce to entailments, it follows from (F) and (G) that

H. Were CHN to have sinned, CHN would not have existed,

which is, as I say, a collapsing counterfactual which cannot be true. [10] Therefore if Freddoso is right that (G) is necessarily true, (F) must be false, being revealed as itself a collapsing

counterfactual. We cannot, on Freddoso's view, defend Christ's freedom by claiming that CHN was able to sin but that were it to do so, it would have been a merely human person. [11]

Why is this internecine debate worth all the bother? The answer is to be found in an issue which lies just beneath the surface, namely, the question, *Could you or I have been God?* This question should not be construed to mean, *Could the person I am have been a divine hypostasis?*, for that is clearly impossible. Rather the question should be taken to mean, *Could the individual human nature which I in fact am have instead been the human nature of a divine hypostasis?* Could the divine Logos have been incarnated as me instead of as Jesus of Nazareth? The question is so repugnant as to seem blasphemous. And yet it is the implication of Flint's view that Christ's individual human nature could have existed independently of its assumption by the divine Logos; it could instead have been a human person, having its own proper hypostasis. As such it does not differ from any other individual human nature. Thus, any human nature is in potentiality to being assumed by a divine person. It is the merit of Freddoso's analysis to reject this conclusion as metaphysically impossible.

III.

In the second of his pair of articles, Flint does address Freddoso's objection. [12] He recasts it as an argument which Socrates might offer:

8. I am identical with Socrates.

9. I cannot exist without being a person.

10. Therefore, Socrates cannot exist without being a person.

He acknowledges that Freddoso's argument presents a challenge to his Thesis 4: It's possible that CHN exist as an independent, unassumed *suppositum*. For according to Thesis 4, an individual human nature which is not in fact a person could have been a person. But if Freddoso is correct that *personhood* is not a property which a thing contingently possesses, then Thesis 4 is false.

Flint, however, rejoins that (9) draws its plausibility from the presupposition that its denial would imply that I might exist in some utterly impersonal manner. But the doctrine of the Incarnation should alert us to another alternative, which is expressed in

9*. I cannot exist without either being a person or being sustained by a person.

Flint believes that (9*) captures the intuition behind (9) while still allowing that *being a person* is a property that human natures only contingently possess.

One might well challenge Flint's claim that his (9*) adequately captures the intuition behind (9). For the "I" in (9*) is a personal indexical whose referent is the person whom we imagine to be asserting (9*). (9*) informs us that a necessary condition of that person's existing is his either being a person or being sustained by a person. But notice that in the second case envisioned, it is a *different* person who is the sustainer. As Flint acknowledges, if God were to assume the individual human nature of an already existing human person, then "that would be to eliminate that nature's personhood." [13] But then it seems incoherent to assert that "I can exist by being sustained by a person." For were I to be sustained by a (different) person, then I should not exist. Thus, there is no possible world in which I both exist and am sustained by another person.

It will do no good to deny that the propositional content expressed by (9*) is devoid of the personal indexical element characteristic of its sentential expression, for linguistic analysis during the past generation has demonstrated convincingly the ineliminability and irreducibility of such indexical reference. [14] In asserting (9*) Socrates is not making a claim reducible to some third-person assertion about Socrates, but is rather referring to himself as himself. Even if we hold that propositional content is person-neutral, we must still postulate some sort of first-person grasping of that content or first-person ascription of properties in order to capture the referent of (9*). We shall not be able to escape by holding that it is possible that someone other than Socrates (*viz.*, the Logos) might grasp that propositional content or self-ascribe the relevant properties in a first-person way, for that would be to assert that the second person of the Trinity might have been the person Socrates is, which Flint recognizes to be incompatible with the doctrine of the Incarnation. The Incarnation requires that the assumed nature is not a person but is sustained by one. However we choose to analyze propositions expressed by sentences containing first-person indexicals, the point remains that the referent of such terms is a person who would not exist were his human nature to be assumed by the Son. Hence, Flint's proposed alternative (9*) seems incoherent, leaving us with (9).

One might try to defend Flint's alternative in the way that Plantinga has defended the existence of *haecceities* or "thisnesses." Plantinga argues that the property which is in fact my thisness can exist without me, though in such a case it would not stand in a *thisness of* relation to me and so

would not be my thisness. [15] Could Flint similarly contend that that entity which I am could exist without me, but in that case would not stand in the *personally identical with* relation to me—standing rather in the *sustained by* relation to the person of the Son? This seems impossible. For identity relations are necessary. Therefore, if I am identical with my human nature, then in any world in which that human nature exists, it is I; that is to say, I exist, which contradicts the hypothesis. Plantinga observes that the real issue with respect to haecceities is not whether we can explain which property a given haecceity is without referring to the object whose thisness it is, but rather whether that property could have been the thing it is if it were not the thisness of the object in question. Regardless of whether haecceities face such a difficulty (Plantinga thinks not), human natures do: If I had not existed, my human nature could not have been the thing it is and so cannot exist unless I exist.

IV.

Flint's proposed escape from Freddoso's objection does not therefore seem to be viable. This implies that Flint's Molinist reflections do not represent a tenable solution to the problem of Christ's impeccability and freedom to sin. Nonetheless, I think that his radical reflections are fruitful in that they serve to raise even more fundamental questions which dig into the very foundations of Christology and thus call for even more radical (in the sense of foundational) reflection. For example, if CHN could have existed as a person independently of being assumed by the Son, then why would that same body/soul composite not be a person when united with the Son? Why would there not be two Sons, one divine and one human? Flint never addresses these questions. If, on the other hand, we deny, as it seems we should, that CHN could have existed as a person independently of being assumed by the Son, then how can CHN be a complete human nature? What is wanting that CHN should not be a person independent of its union with the Logos? Neither does Freddoso address these questions. I suggest that in order to answer such questions, we must be prepared to think even more radically than Flint has proposed. [16]

Footnotes:

[1]

Thomas P. Flint, "The Possibilities of Incarnation: Some Radical Molinist Suggestions," *Religious Studies* 37 (2001): 307; see also his earlier, " 'A Death He Freely Accepted': Molinist Reflections on the Incarnation," *Faith and Philosophy* 18 (2001): 3-20.

[2]

Flint, " 'A Death He Freely Accepted'," pp. 3-20.

[3]

Alfred J. Freddoso, "Human Nature, Potency, and the Incarnation," *Faith and Philosophy* 3 (1986): 27-53.

[4]

Flint, "Molinist Reflections," pp. 8-9.

[5]

Thomas P. Flint, *Divine Providence*, Cornell Studies in the Philosophy of Religion (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998), pp. 186-189.

[6]

Freddoso, "Human Nature," p. 43. In particular, Freddoso is willing to affirm the non-trivial truth of the counterfactual, "If Christ's individual human nature existed but were not, by a special act of God, sustained by a divine person, then it would not be sustained by a divine person and, hence, would be a human person." The antecedent is impossible because CHN cannot exist apart from being sustained by a divine person. But if it could and so were a human person, there is no reason for Freddoso to deny that that person would have sinned if placed in D^* .

"Philosophers who believe that there are non-trivially true counterpossibles (counterfactuals with impossible antecedents) reject the inference pattern $[(P \Box \rightarrow P) \ \& \ \Box (P \rightarrow Q)] \rightarrow (P \Box \rightarrow Q)$. For if this inference pattern is valid, then one can show that $\Box(P \rightarrow Q)$ implies that $P \Box \rightarrow Q$. But this implication does not always hold if there are non-trivially true counterpossibles. For if P is an impossible proposition, then P necessarily implies anything and everything. So if P is an impossible proposition, then it is true that $\Box(P \rightarrow Q)$, no matter what Q represents. So, for

example, it is true both that "Necessarily, if God does not exist, the universe does not exist" and "Necessarily, if God does not exist, the universe exists anyway." But if there are non-trivially true counterpossibles, it does not follow from the truth of "Necessarily, if God does not exist, the universe exists anyway" that "If God were not to exist, then the universe would exist anyway." Thus, if there are non-trivially true counterpossibles, then it is not the case that $\Box(P \rightarrow Q)$ implies that $P \Box \rightarrow Q$. But if that implication fails, then the transitive inference pattern on which it is based also fails.

[\[7\]](#)

Flint, "Molinist Reflections," p. 14.

[\[8\]](#)

Ibid., p. 15.

[\[9\]](#)

Ibid.

[\[10\]](#)

Flint in his discussion of collapsing counterfactuals does say that if the antecedent of a collapsing counterfactual is impossible, then there is "no difficulty" in its being true (Flint, *Divine Providence*, p. 188). But that is because on the usual Stalnaker Lewis semantics, such counterfactuals all turn out to be vacuously true. On the more plausible view that there are counterpossibles which are non-trivially true (see note 6 above), the impossibility of a collapsing counterfactual's antecedent cannot alone rescue it from falsehood.

[\[11\]](#)

This is not to say that Christ was not free in a libertarian sense. Rather we may adopt some sort of Frankfurtian account of libertarian freedom, as Morris has done in his Christology (Thomas V. Morris, *The Logic of God Incarnate* [Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1986], pp. 146-53).

[\[12\]](#)

Flint, "Possibilities of Incarnation," pp. 315-18.

[\[13\]](#)

Ibid., p. 317.

[\[14\]](#)

See, e.g., John Perry, "The Problem of the Essential Indexical," *Nous* 13 (1979): 3-19.

[\[15\]](#)

Alvin Plantinga, "Reply to Kit Fine," in *Alvin Plantinga*, ed. Jas. E. Tomberlin and Peter van Inwagen, Profiles 5 (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1985), pp. 335-6.

[\[16\]](#)

As I have attempted to do in chapter 29 of J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations of a Christian Worldview* (Downer's Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity Press, 2003). How would the adoption of a Christology along my broadly Apollinarian lines (once rehabilitated to meet the standards of orthodoxy) sketched there affect Flint's specific, radical Molinist suggestions? It would rule out

Thesis 1: Necessarily, being assumable is a contingent feature of any assumable individual human nature.

For the human nature of Christ would be in itself anhypostatic and so cannot exist apart from its union with the Logos. Hence, the only true counterfactuals about how CHN would behave if placed in lifelong, freedom-retaining circumstances are counterfactuals concerning how the Logos Himself would behave under such circumstances. As the second person of the Trinity, the Logos cannot sin, and thus His refraining from sin under the envisioned circumstances is not a contingent matter. Therefore, it is not (necessarily) true that the assumability of any assumable individual human nature is a contingent feature of that nature. Regardless of which body the Logos chose to be united with, the body-soul composite which is the result of the Incarnation and is the individual human nature of Christ is incapable of sin, so that its assumability is not a contingent feature of it.

Moreover, it is also false that

Thesis 2: It's possible that CHN was neither assumed nor assumable.

For although there are presumably possible worlds in which the Logos chooses a different body than that of Jesus of Nazareth in which to be incarnate or worlds in which no Incarnation at all takes place, so that it is possible that CHN is not assumed, nevertheless CHN is essentially assumable because its soul is the Logos, who is impeccable. Therefore, it is impossible for CHN to be unassumable.

My proposed Christology will, however, countenance Flint's

Thesis 3: It's possible that there be an individual human nature distinct from CHN that was both assumable and assumed.

In order for there to be a distinct individual human nature which is assumable by the Logos, all that is required is that the Logos unite with some body of flesh other than Jesus of Nazareth's. This is no more problematic than my soul's being born with a different body. The union of the Logos with a different flesh would have constituted a distinct individual human nature even though the soul of that body would be the same soul as that of Jesus, namely, the Logos Himself. We have no reason to deny that in some possible world the Logos en-souled some different body than Jesus' body, so that it is possible that a distinct individual human nature is assumed by the Logos, and is therefore assumable.

I have already rejected

Thesis 4: It's possible that CHN exist as an independent, unassumed *suppositum*.

This thesis makes it very difficult to resist Nestorianism. If Jesus of Nazareth had a soul distinct from the Logos, so as to be able to exist as an unassumed *suppositum* or hypostasis, then it is extraordinarily difficult to see why there would not be in Christ two persons, one human and one divine. But Apollinarianism makes the doctrine of enhypostasis, implicit in Chalcedon, perspicuous. Indeed, the very language of assumption or assumability becomes somewhat misleading, for such language conjures up the image of the Logos's coming upon or taking on an independently existing body-soul composite, or man, which is difficult to distinguish from ordinary indwelling. On an Apollinarian Christology it is preferable to speak of the Logos's grounding, rather than assuming, a human nature, for the human nature of Christ becomes complete only in its union with the Logos.

We shall also reject Flint's

Thesis 5: There are in the actual world individual human natures distinct from CHN that were assumable.

For while it is true that the Logos could have been united with a body physically indistinguishable from that of, say, Bill Clinton's, nevertheless He could not have assumed any human nature that was a complete body-soul composite. For then there would have been two persons, one human and one divine.

Finally, we shall for the same reason reject

Thesis 6: Necessarily, every human nature is possibly assumed.

For any human nature existing independently of the Logos is personally impenetrable to, even if indwellable by, the Logos.

Thus, I think that most of Flint's radical Molinist suggestions for Christology ought to be rejected. Their unacceptability springs, not merely from Flint's analysis of the freedom of Christ's human nature to sin, but also from broad, fundamental Christological considerations which confront any Chalcedonian theology. In order to secure a genuine Incarnation while avoiding Nestorianism, I suggest that we take another look at Apollinarianism, suitably rehabilitated. But once we have taken that radical route, we find that we have good reason to reject Flint's own radical suggestions.

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