

The Ends of the Divine: David Bentley Hart and Jordan Daniel Wood on Grace

JAMES DOMINIC ROONEY, O.P.

Hong Kong Baptist University

Hong Kong, China

David Bentley Hart and Jordan Daniel Wood stand alongside some modern theologians in their diagnosis that there is a problem in an overly transcendent account of the divine nature. If God were unable to be affected by what happens in the world, many think, then God cannot really be responsive to or care about us. Unlike “radical kenotic” theologians who hold that God is *affected by* the world and deny the classical doctrine of divine impassibility, however, Hart and Wood argue that we can get an intimate God–world relation without denying impassibility. If it were true that God was so free and unlimited as to express himself without hindrance in creating this world and guiding its history (they argue), then the world would necessarily express God’s own inner life perfectly. There would be a non-contingent and mutual relation between the world and God’s inner life.

The Hart/Wood strategy appears to have all the right upshots of the radical kenotic views without sacrificing the metaphysics. However, this strategy rests upon a seriously fraught modal claim: that God *could not have done otherwise* than what he did (in creation, the Incarnation, redemption, etc.). This modal claim supports their inferences about the ways in which creation and its history will necessarily reflect who or what God is. Phrases about God being *unable to do otherwise* or acting “necessarily” lend themselves to equivocation, as it is easy to slip between *de re* and *de dicto* uses of “necessary.” We need to distinguish:

1. Necessarily, if God creates, then God creates (and does so from eternity).
2. If God creates, then God necessarily creates.

To affirm 1 is true is only to say (*de dicto*) that, necessarily, whenever it is true God creates, then it is true he creates. This first proposition poses no serious metaphysical or theological puzzle. The necessity here concerns a relation among propositions. On reading 1, the “necessity” qualifies over not God’s creating, but the conditional; there thus could be other logically possible situations where God does not create. That is, if “God creates” is true, then “God creates eternally” is also true, simply on account of God’s actions necessarily being eternal in duration. The mere fact that God has a relation to the universe which is “necessarily eternal” in that way does not by itself entail that God cannot do otherwise than create.

To affirm 2, by contrast, would be to switch to the claim that God creates necessarily, with the necessity concerning God’s creating itself. Thus, 2 involves a relation of *metaphysical* necessity (*de re*). If God *cannot not* do or cause *x*, then *x* is metaphysically necessary insofar as *x* “could not not exist” or “could not not be otherwise.” What I will show is that Hart and Wood both hold that, given God’s character, his choices and actions simply could not be otherwise. That is, both hold reading 2. Since Hart and Wood appeal to God’s character, they do not appeal to a relation among propositions or the relation among facts such that, necessarily, given God chose to create, God chooses to create. Their views involve a strong modal thesis about God’s actions that goes beyond traditional claims that God’s actions befit his wisdom, since, on those traditional claims, many possible courses of action could equally befit God’s wisdom. Both Hart and Wood deny that God could have done anything else apart from what he (actually) did in creation and salvation that would befit his wisdom or character.

I will show that, if such a modal claim is to support the implications that Hart and Wood (and others) draw from it, God would bear a relation to the world that is constitutive of his divine identity. I group these two together since Hart and Wood represent what appear to be the fundamentally logically exhaustive ways of pursuing this strategy in terms of either the divine nature or the persons. And their strategy is embraced by a family of theoretically similar contemporary proposals in theology. Yet, on views of the relationship between God and the world that resemble Hart or Wood, then, God depends upon the world to be who or what he is, just as much as radical kenotic theories that they reject. Since their project fails by their own

standards, I conclude that Hart/Wood types of strategies bear no advantages over radical kenoticism.

David Bentley Hart

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel is well known for proposing a view in which God has an intimate ontological relationship with his creation, one in which (broadly speaking) God depends on what occurs in his economic activity *ad extra* for who/what he is *ad intra*. David Bentley Hart is critical of the views of German Idealists such as Hegel: “[With] the notion that the economic Trinity actually somehow constitutes the immanent in its ultimate identity, the nature of God becomes war rather than peace. . . . The Hegelian divine is one whose nature is not simply expressed upon the cross, but also fashioned through the probative negation of crucifixion as such, as well as through every other form of conflict, . . . and therefore one in which that violence is necessarily . . . eternalized by its sublation into Geist.”¹ Views such as these, Hart suggests, undermine (among other things) the freedom of God and evacuate grace of its proper meaning.² Hart therefore rejects that “God becoming human and humanity becoming God is not God becoming God.”³

Nevertheless, Hart thinks there is a false dilemma in the background that made the German Idealist solution unnecessary. As Hart reads them, the problem these Idealists were facing was the way in which to understand God’s intimate relationship with the world. “Hegel is to be commended for recognizing . . . Christian confession requires that nothing in nature or history can be simply extrinsic to . . . the divine life.”⁴ That is, the problem is explaining the way in which God and creation are mutually non-contingently related. The Idealist solution opted for the view that God had a relationship with the world which was integral to his being, in virtue of God’s ontological dependence upon that world to be God. Instead, however, Hart proposes a different route for resolving this problem that relies not on ontological dependence, but rather on the *moral character* of God. Since “perfect freedom is the unhindered realization of a nature in its proper end; and God’s infinite freedom is the eternal fulfillment of the divine nature in the divine life,” Hart concludes that creation necessarily will reflect the perfection of

¹ David Bentley Hart, *You Are Gods* [YG] (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2022), 84.

² Hart, YG, 95.

³ Hart, YG, 125.

⁴ Hart, YG, 125.

God's divine life—the universe and its history could not have been otherwise, given God's character.⁵

In his earlier *Beauty of the Infinite* in 2004, Hart explains that, since creation “adds nothing to God, but only participates in Him,” God did not need to create; rather, creation is “necessary” only in an “aesthetic” sense: “It has been from eternity fitting to God's goodness to be a loving creator, manifesting his trinitarian love in creatures.”⁶ For this reason, creation essentially reflects God's nature without God determining his own being by creating: “Creation is a free and expressive display whose every detail declares God's glory, and not an odyssey of divine self-determination.”⁷

Yet, in later works, one notices a progressive ratcheting up of the strength Hart attributes to God's decisions, which go seemingly beyond “aesthetic fittingness.” Increasingly, Hart emphasizes that God inevitably or necessarily expresses his own being *perfectly* or *completely* in creation and draws conclusions from this necessity. Hart thus proposed in 2006/2009 that “there is *no other world that God might have created*, [because] nothing can hinder him from expressing his essential and infinite goodness *perfectly*.”⁸ These claims are significantly stronger than aesthetic fittingness, since Hart is proposing that there is no other possible world apart from the one God creates, and that the reason for this is that God freely expresses his own being “perfectly.” Hart supports this by asserting that, if creation were not “a direct expression of God's Logos,” then God would be acting “purely arbitrarily.”⁹

Hart's views progressively reflect the influence of Sergius Bulgakov. When Hart responds to criticisms of Bulgakov in a later article included in his 2020 *Theological Territories*, Hart argues for and endorses modal claims regarding creation which are obviously stronger than “aesthetic fittingness.” As he sees it, Bulgakov (“better than any theologian of the last century”) achieved a balance between the “immanent and infinitely sufficient divine life” and “the contingency and gratuity of the economy of creation and salvation” and saw that “any hint of arbitrariness in our understanding of the relation between God's transcendence and creation's contingency” will entail that God is akin to a finite agent “whose actuality is surpassed by a larger realm of unrealized possibility”—which is impossible, as God would thereby depend “upon a

⁵ Hart, *YG*, 125.

⁶ David Bentley Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 256.

⁷ Hart, *Beauty*, 257.

⁸ David Bentley Hart, “*Christian Century* Interview” (2006), in *In the Aftermath* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 118–23 (emphasis mine).

⁹ Hart, “*Christian Century* Interview.”

reality greater than himself.”¹⁰ Hart expands on this reasoning: the position that God has alternative possibilities available to him would imply that God has a “gnomic” or deliberative will whose freedom involves “a reduction of potency to act,” and therefore God would be related to creation by a “real relation” such that he undergoes a “pathos” or change which “modifies his nature” when he chooses to create a given world.¹¹

Hart’s argument is curious, to say the least. He seems to endorse two conditionals.

1. If there were other possible worlds, then God’s powers would not be fully actualized.
2. If God’s powers were not fully actualized, then God would depend upon something outside of himself.

Both involve assumptions in conflict with that package of views philosophers refer to as “classical theism” (given the endorsement of these views by the classical tradition of theistic thinking), despite Hart’s own appeal to that set of views as bolstering his own position. On classical theistic approaches, God has only active power *to do*, not passive potential *to be affected*. God bringing about some effect establishes only a logical relation between God and what he does, rather than a real relation by which God is *actualized* or *changed*. All that comes to exist is on the side of a creature, such that only non-intrinsic “Cambridge changes” are true of God.¹² Yet, [1] seems to presume that God has “passive potentiality” which gets actualized when God acts. Otherwise, God not doing all that he could do would not affect whether God was purely actual. And, if we grant the classical theistic gloss on 1 that God is no less actual when he does less than he can in his active power, then 2 would not follow, since, if God did not actualize all that he could do, this does not entail that God was affected in some way or was in potential to being changed by another.¹³

¹⁰ David Bentley Hart, *Theological Territories [TT]* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2020), 58.

¹¹ Hart, *TT*, 59.

¹² “Cambridge changes” are truths about the relation of a subject to another, but which involve no intrinsic change in the subject. For instance, the truth of whether X is “to the left of” Y can change with no intrinsic change or change of position in X.

¹³ See an analysis of these puzzles in James Dominic Rooney, “Classical Theists are Committed to the Palamite Distinction between God’s Essence and Energies,” in *Classical Theism: New Essays on the Metaphysics of God*, ed. R. Koons and J. Fuqua (London: Routledge, 2023): 318–38.

What is implicit in Hart's argument seems to be brought out in response to his critic Brandon Gallaher, who objected that God would be unfree if he could not have done otherwise in regard to creation. Hart responds that Gallaher's view of freedom is not appropriate to God, and that we should instead follow Bulgakov. Hart proposes that freedom consists "essentially in the full realization of a nature in its own true end." For created agents, this involves actualizing among alternative possibilities. For God, however, who is actuality itself, "any 'could have been otherwise,' any decision among opposed possibilities, . . . would be an impossible defect of his freedom." Hart therefore concludes that the distinction between freedom and necessity in regard to God is "meaningless." In his conclusion of this argument, however, Hart emphasizes a different aspect of the reason that God cannot have alternative possibilities: "God is not a being *choosing his nature* from among a range of options; he simply is reality as such."¹⁴ What this claim implies is that the intentional actions of finite agents are those which actualize some potential of the agent and cause the agent to develop a moral character. Given that God's character is necessarily "fixed," in the sense that God necessarily does not develop or change who he is because of his actions, there are no possibilities for God to do otherwise.

When we examine Hart's arguments that God's choices could not have been otherwise in his 2022 *You are Gods*, the two strands of argument are seen to form one whole. Hart argues that it would be impossible to "provide a coherent account of why God creates this world rather than some other" if God were conceived of as "arbitrarily selecting from among an infinity of possible worlds, any of which is equally incapable of expressing the infinity of his goodness."¹⁵ The tenor of Hart's argument is that God would be acting arbitrarily if he selected among various equivalently good ways to express his goodness; therefore, there is at most *only* this "one world of Christ" that can express the infinity of God's goodness; and therefore, this world is the only world that God could have created. The appeal to God's being such that he necessarily *perfectly* expresses his goodness is what ensures that God must create and create the world that he does: "No dimension of the divine fullness can be lacking [in creation], even the dimension of that fullness expressing itself 'beyond' itself in creating the actual world."¹⁶

Hart endorses the view that the world is "contingent" only insofar as it ontologically depends upon God, not because God could have refrained

¹⁴ Hart, *TT*, 61 (emphasis mine).

¹⁵ Hart, *YG*, 122.

¹⁶ Hart, *YG*, 128.

from creating it. Thus, Hart is clear when he notes that, on his view, “creation inevitably follows from who [God] is,” but that “this in no way alters the truth that creation, in itself, ‘might not have been,’ so long as this claim is understood as a modal definition, a statement of ontological contingency, a recognition that creation receives its being from beyond itself and so has no necessity intrinsic to itself.”¹⁷ Yet, if Hart’s views are to be taken at face value that God cannot do otherwise than create, and create in such a way that he cannot choose to create a world other than the actual world (where he expresses the fullness of his divine nature), then Hart seems confused in denying that his views entail that the world is metaphysically necessary.

We can make sense of these claims as follows. Hart seems to hold that, while creation is intrinsically a contingent being that depends upon God for its existence, it is nevertheless false that creation *might not have been*, relative to God’s nature and his choice to create this precise world (which could not have been otherwise). Hart thus affirms that the world is metaphysically necessary in one way but not another. And Hart’s position would have precedents. Muslim theologians have argued similarly that God would act arbitrarily if he created less than the best possible world, and thus could not have created anything other than our world, the best possible that *perfectly* expresses his goodness. Since God exists necessarily, then, the world too exists necessarily. Yet these theologians distinguish that creation (and its history) is not *essentially* a necessary being, as God is.¹⁸ On the Muslim picture, creation is merely *accidentally* metaphysically necessary (“necessary through another”), a necessary result of God’s decisions that could not be otherwise. Note, then, that Hart’s claim that the world is a contingent being involves a logical mistake: if it is true both that God exists necessarily and that God can do nothing other than create this world (given who or what God is), then, as it is necessary that God exists, it is also necessary that the world exists. In which case, of course, the world cannot be a contingent being. That is, it is impossible that the world *could not have been*.¹⁹ More precisely, the world is a necessary being—but necessary through another.

Another lacuna is that Hart’s view on that score is clear in his response to the worry that this “necessity” would undermine the free character of God’s decision to create. Hart, for instance, simply rejects that, if God could not

¹⁷ Hart, *YG*, 126.

¹⁸ See Khalil Andani, “Divine Simplicity and the Myth of Modal Collapse,” *European Journal of Analytic Philosophy* 18, no. 2 (2022), hrca.k.srce.hr/287382.

¹⁹ As Edward Feser pointed out in private correspondence, this is simply an application of the modal *modus ponens* rule.

have refrained from creating, then creation would not be a free product of God's will:

The gratuity of the gift lies not in the possibility that it might not have been given but solely in the free intention of the giver: a wedding ring, for instance, is no less a gift because it is the *required* expression of the love that gives it, nor is my love for my child any less a free gift because I would of my nature be incapable of withholding it (in fact, that love makes me fully free by fulfilling my nature with its inevitability). By the same token, but on an immeasurably vaster scale, God's infinite intention of his own goodness in creatures is itself infinite gratuity.²⁰

Hart appeals to a characterization of a "free" act as one that expresses one's moral character. Since God cannot be other than perfectly good, his acts could not be otherwise, given his moral character. God's decision to create, if it is to be truly free, cannot have been otherwise; God could not have failed to create the world, and precisely the actual world. But this does not make those acts "compelled," as if God were acting from an exterior force, but supremely free, since they express his moral character perfectly.

The fact that creation reflects God's character lies in the fact that every choice God makes is necessarily referred to his own being, that is, his "election" of himself, and thus all created beings could not be other than elected within the eternal life of God:

[God's] "election" of himself in the Son in the Spirit's light is always also the eternal reality of his election of himself in all that is contained in the Logos, including the entirety of creation and history. The drama of creation and salvation is not a distant analogy of the divine life, and the presence of the taxis of the Trinity right within the dynamism of creaturely divinization is not merely a secondary effect of the eternal divine taxis. Neither is it something external to the divine identity. . . . It cannot be an interval merely of accidental and extrinsic relatedness between two separate things. Our being in God and God's being in us are both also and more originally God's being as God. . . . Nothing can exist in history that is not always already redeemed and divinized in eternity. All things are created in their last end, and if they were not already fully reconciled to God and in full spiritual and ontological union with him they would

²⁰ Hart, *TT*, 63.

never come into existence. Created spirits exist because they are, from everlasting, gods in God.²¹

On Hart's account, God's choices in creation and its history do not accidentally reflect the inner Trinitarian life of God. Creation and salvation history are then supposed to follow from and be essentially reflective of divine life. Hart draws implications from this that are suggestive and radical, such as that "created spirits" are "from everlasting, gods in God," or in his *That All Shall Be Saved*, where Hart argues that God's moral character precludes even the permission of the possibility of damnation; "the moral destiny of creation and the moral nature of God are absolutely inseparable."²² These decisions to divinize creatures and to ensure their ultimate salvation clearly could not be otherwise, for Hart, given God's character.

Following the work of Harry Frankfurt, what Hart appears to be referring to are usually termed "volitional" necessities.²³ Such necessities are encapsulated in Martin Luther's famous claim: "Here I stand; I can do no other."²⁴ For Luther, it is obvious that the statement expresses his *freely formed* character. Volitional necessities are formed through *prior decisions* on the part of individuals, and that is what intuitively makes them free. The fact that one chooses to get married, or to have children, is what intuitively makes a subsequent commitment to spouse or child a free commitment, even if we assume someone might not have been able to do otherwise *given* the prior decision. Nobody is married or a mother/father from birth. If Luther had been *born* unable to do otherwise than hold his views, such that any other views would have been unthinkable and nothing he did in his life could have changed which views he held, it is not clear that this declaration would have held the same meaning.

Yet Hart explicitly repudiates that God forms his character through his decisions. Unlike Luther, God cannot have a history of moral decisions. Hart cannot straightforwardly appeal to cases such as the giving of a wedding ring as "required" for the expression of love, or a mother/father being "incapable of withholding" love from their child, as it cannot be the case for Hart that God *chose* to be a creator and *then* took on the "inevitable" or "necessary" responsibility of acting as one. Rather, God would necessarily

²¹ Hart, *YG*, 116.

²² David Bentley Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019), 69.

²³ E.g., Harry Frankfurt, *Necessity, Volition, and Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

²⁴ See Daniel Dennett, *Elbow Room* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984), 133.

have chosen to create and acted in line with the responsibilities of doing so without any possible alternatives being open to God at any point. But then Hart's analogies do nothing to make plausible that God creates freely. It is hard to say what force they are supposed to have, however, as Hart remains vague as to that in virtue of which these volitional necessities hold for God. God's acts seem to flow directly and simply from God's nature, which could not have been otherwise. But then God's acts do not obviously resemble the case of volitional necessities, which are necessities following upon *freely developed* character. It is hard to see any intuitive sense in which God's acts are supposed to be relevantly like the examples.

Conversely, Hart's argument from divine arbitrariness is specious. There is no obvious metaphysical or conceptual impossibility in God's choices being *both* non-deliberative *and* contingent. Apart from the fact that I see no good argument Hart gives to this effect, I would note that Maximus the Confessor, the same authority to whom Hart appeals, clearly accepts that God's will is non-deliberative and does not choose necessarily. In response to the accusation that, if Christ's will is natural and not "gnomic" or deliberative, then Christ would act necessarily, Maximus rejects that Christ acts necessarily even though he acts without deliberation. Maximus proposes a *reductio ad absurdum* that, if one accepted such an understanding of will which rules out free choice except on the basis of (gnomic) deliberation, then "God, Who is by nature God, by nature good, and by nature Creator, must of necessity be [not only] God and good, but also Creator." Maximus, unlike Hart, does not accept this conclusion that God necessarily creates. "To think, much less to speak, in this manner is blasphemous. Who then attributes necessity to God?"²⁵

Hart's argument that we can hold that God has alternative possibilities only on account of imagining God as finite agent is specious too. We do not arrive at knowledge of the contingency of God's choices from thinking about God as making deliberative choices, nor do claims about God having alternative possibilities need to be cashed out in such terms. To the contrary, we can reason backward from the fact that something is metaphysically contingent to the fact that God does not necessarily will that it exists. If my computer desk need never have existed, then there are possible situations or worlds in which God exists and my desk does not. That is simply the meaning of metaphysical contingency. (Otherwise, my desk would be metaphysically

²⁵ Maximus the Confessor, *The Disputation with Pyrrhus of Our Father among the Saints, Maximus the Confessor*, trans. J. Farrell (Waymart, PA: St. Tikhon's Monastery Press, 2015), no. 25.

necessary, even if it would be “necessary through another.”) Similarly, we can reason backward from facts about possibilities to the fact that God does not necessarily will those possibilities to be actual. If it is possible for the moon to be made of green cheese, it is possible for God to have created the moon that way; if it is possible for God to have created the moon that way, even if it were not actually the case that the moon is made of green cheese now or at any time in the future or past, then God does not necessarily will that the moon is made of green cheese. And, conversely, to speak about God having alternative possibilities for choice is simply to speak about what is contingent and possible.

Hart is notably and persistently unclear on exactly what theoretical weight he gives to the “necessity” of God’s choices, which is what is supposed to support inferences to the unique outcomes he prefers. For example, it would clearly undermine Hart’s positions if it were true that God could have good reasons to create a different world, or to redeem us in a way other than through the Cross, or not to elevate rational creatures to a participation in God’s own life through grace, or not unilaterally to ensure that all are saved. Yet, as opposed to the illuminating and detailed debates in analytical theology about God’s motives in creation,²⁶ and despite Hart’s repeated appeal to God’s moral character, much of what Hart says seems irrelevant or, at best, ambiguous on critical points. In the end, Hart’s arguments against the alternative—that contingency in creation would imply unacceptable “arbitrariness”—are not compelling. It is not obvious that the mere fact that a free choice could have been otherwise entails that the choice is arbitrary or random. Peter van Inwagen, for example, admits that the falsity of determinism entails rather mysterious facts about the way in which free actions could be otherwise—but is not dissuaded from affirming that free will exists.²⁷ For theologians above all, some kinds of mysteries can be acceptable.

Jordan Daniel Wood

Wood aims to address the same problematic as Hart, offering an account of the way in which divine and created nature are non-contingently and

²⁶ E.g., Mark Johnston, “Why Did the One Not Remain within Itself?” in *Oxford Studies in the Philosophy of Religion*, vol. 9, ed. L. Buchak, D. Zimmerman, P. Swenson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019): 106–64; Alexander Pruss, “Ineffability and Creation,” in *Oxford Studies in the Philosophy of Religion* 10, ed. L. Buchak, D. Zimmerman, P. Swenson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022): 301–10.

²⁷ See Peter van Inwagen, “Free Will Remains a Mystery,” *Philosophical Perspectives* 14 (2000): 1–19.

mutually related. As Wood states the problem, it is to explain “how exactly God can relate to what is both from him alone and yet not him.”²⁸ Instead of Bulgakov and Hart’s appeal to facts about the divine character *qua* God’s nature, however, Wood appeals to the person of the Word. He holds that divine nature and creation remain necessarily distinct *qua* their natures, but that these natures are non-contingently related *qua* their relation to the Word.

Gods creative act is . . . an act of self-identification with that creation. . . . His becoming the world is the world’s very generation, yet he retains the full integrity of his divinity. And if in the Word God identifies himself with the world, then the God–world relation bears a deeper and different identity than whatever unity obtains between created and uncreated natures (say, analogy or participation or the limitation of act by power).²⁹

Wood takes as his guiding insight a claim from Maximus that “the Word of God, very God, wills that the mystery of his Incarnation be actualized always and in all things.”³⁰ Wood uses this claim to attribute to Maximus the controversial view that creation apparently involves the hypostatic union of the Word with the whole of creation, not merely with the human nature of the Son: “The created world’s subsistence is the Word’s own hypostasis.”³¹

As Wood sees it, the Incarnation of the Son in time is only the “actualization” of the already-existing union of each creature with the Word. Since the Word is the pattern of creation, and thus of the *logoi*, or rational principles within created things, and the Word is eternally hypostatically united with human nature, then everything which God created is hypostatically united with Christ. The Word really is already incarnate in some way within (i.e., hypostatically united with) the created universe: “The *logoi* that establish the world’s essence are the Word himself and not participated forms or ideas

²⁸ Jordan Daniel Wood, *The Whole Mystery of Christ* [WMC] (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2022), 86.

²⁹ Wood, WMC, 34.

³⁰ Maximus, *Ambiguum ad Iohannem* 7.22, cited in Wood, WMC, 216.

³¹ Wood, WMC, 36. Wood appeals repeatedly to *Amb. ad Ioan.* 7.21–22 as holding that “the Word makes himself identical to our *logoi*, so that the actualization of our *logoi* is simultaneously the Word’s actualization of his works—indeed *himself*—in us” (274n225; emphasis mine). But it does not seem that Maximus here or elsewhere says anything about Christ’s hypostasis being *in* the world, i.e., the world having the same hypostasis as the Son, in virtue of the world containing *logoi* that pre-exist in God.

that subsist on their own.”³² Wood summarizes this eternal unity with creation—that the Word himself “processes” into things, forming part of their hypostatic being as a necessary consequence of his own eternal identity—in the mantra that “creation is incarnation.”

Wood’s account resembles Hart’s in that Wood takes these facts about the connection between creation and incarnation to be *necessary*. The gloss that Wood gives to Maximus’s saying that God wills the Incarnation to be actualized “always and in all things” is that God’s intention to create and become incarnate count not have been otherwise. To put it simply, there is no possible world in which God creates and in which the Son does not become incarnate. Wood is also explicit in endorsing the view that God could not have done otherwise than create the world, appealing to Bulgakov (as we will see below) as a gloss on Maximus’s views.³³

Wood gives one argument for these views which begins by appealing to a doctrine on which the *logoi* by which God creates all creatures, the “pre-existing principles of all creatures,” are necessarily both ideas of potential creatures and the acts of will by which he chooses to create them. Thus, Wood identifies “God’s thinking up potential beings and willing them to be.”³⁴ In light of this assumption about *logoi*, Wood thinks it follows that “creation is inevitable” because, “if God could have willed otherwise for creation, . . . then God could have simply been another God, which is absurd. There is no idea in God to which he might have never granted being.”³⁵

Wood fleshes out the reasoning in a footnote:

If a creature *is it must always be* because its being comes from its *logos* and this *logos* is as eternally fixed as God himself. For Maximus there are only two options: either God intended a thing’s existence from eternity or that thing was not intended at all and so was no-thing in God’s mind. Otherwise it would be as if God later thought something up to create it, or perhaps—and this is the standard line—he thought it up and “decided” not to create it. Either way this violates what is for Maximus fundamental: “The purpose of God, who created all things, must be changeless concerning them” (*Amb* 42.15; *PG*, 91:1329C; cf. also 42.13–16). If he had an idea he may or may not have created, clearly this would imply that God could have had one of two purposes

³² Wood, *WMC*, 96.

³³ Wood, *WMC*, 98.

³⁴ Jordan Daniel Wood, “Creation Is Incarnation,” *Modern Theology* 34, no. 1 (2018): 84.

³⁵ Wood, “Creation Is Incarnation,” 84–85.

for that idea: to be or not to be. But then the God we know too could have been or not been.³⁶

Wood's argument involves several confusions. First, it involves the logical mistake of confusing *de dicto* and *de re* modalities. "Necessarily, if God chooses to create something, it is true that he chooses to create it" does not entail that "if God chooses to create something, he necessarily chooses to create it." That same confusion is also present in Wood's objection that, if God's choice to create could have been otherwise and was contingent, then this would mean that "the purpose of God" would not be "changeless." If God chose not to create, God's choice not to create would be true from eternity; it would not follow that God changed as a result of his choice. Second, perhaps what Wood means by "there is no idea in God to which he might have never granted being" is that God cannot have *logoi* of anything that he could not *possibly* intend to create. If so, the *logoi* constitute the range of what is metaphysically possible. But then it does not follow that, therefore, God will grant being to some *logoi* or other. If we read this claim "there is no idea in God to which he might have never granted being" to the contrary, as holding of each *logoi* individually that God would not have this *logoi* if it were not actual at some time or other, then Wood's claims are rather more weighty. Wood would be claiming that nothing is possible that is not actual at some time or other. This would entail that God must create and make actual anything of which he has a *logoi* concerning. But this assumption, aside from being what looks like a poor reading of Dionysius, would imply that, since Adam actually fell, it would be impossible for Adam not to have fallen, or that Christ could not have *not* been crucified. This is implausible and has severely bad implications for theology.

Third, to say, "the God we know could have not been," seems to confuse the epistemic with metaphysical. If God had not created anything, God would have not made the decisions which we know about through his creation and revelation, and we would not know about God at all, since we simply would not exist. While Wood points out that Maximus claims that God's creation reveals that God is "truly Creator by nature,"³⁷ it does not thereby follow that God would not exist or that God was not the same God as the one that created this universe. In running a marathon, I reveal myself to be *capable* of running a marathon "by nature"; but it does not follow that, if I were not to run the marathon, I would not be naturally capable of doing

³⁶ Wood, "Creation Is Incarnation," 85n13.

³⁷ Wood, *WMC*, 97–98.

so or that I would be a different person or non-existent. To interpret Wood as not making this mistake of confusing the epistemic with the metaphysical, however, would lead to interpreting his argument as entailing views that Wood explicitly rejects. If God's character would have been otherwise had God chosen not to create, God would be affected by what he does. That implication is contrary to Wood's own stated views.

Wood, like Hart, explicitly rejects radical kenoticism: "There is no natural or necessary link between God and world. Creation is an act of sheer gratuity, an act which may well have never been at all."³⁸ But what Wood means by "an act which may well have never been at all" is the same as Hart: creation is not "self-sufficient" metaphysically and is ontologically dependent upon God. Wood enunciates this in a footnote, against George Florovsky's claim that "the world could not have existed," by arguing that Florovsky's perspective depends on confusing "whether creation depends on God" with "whether God is the sort of God who could not but give himself as the source of what wholly depends on him."³⁹ Wood claims Maximus would reject that God could fail to create the universe; instead, "Maximus joins those venerable voices of the patristic tradition who affirm creation's 'sublime necessity,' rarely defended in contemporary theology with the exception of . . . Sergius Bulgakov."⁴⁰

Bulgakov's short argument that God could not have done otherwise than create, cited by Wood, is that, "if it is in general possible for God's omnipotence to create the world, it would be improper for God's love not to actualize this possibility, inasmuch as, for love, it is natural to love, exhausting to the end all the possibilities of love."⁴¹ This argument is distinct from that previously offered, as it does not rely on the modal transposition of Wood's argument from *logoi*. The Bulgakov argument non-coincidentally resembles that of Hart, that God can do nothing short of perfectly expressing his infinite goodness in what he creates, or presumably God's choice to create would be unacceptably arbitrary in some way.

Wood adds nuance to Bulgakov's argument by assuming certain facts about what is necessary for God to create. For Wood, God necessarily creates by means of his *Logos*, the Word, and so necessarily "the *Logos* is the *logoi* and the *logoi* the *Logos*."⁴² Wood rejects that the Word would thereby

³⁸ Wood, "Creation Is Incarnation," 84.

³⁹ Wood, *WMC*, 97n191.

⁴⁰ Wood, *WMC*, 97–98.

⁴¹ Wood, *WMC*, 98n197; taken from Sergius Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God*, trans. Boris Jakim (1933; repr. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 120.

⁴² Wood, *WMC*, 89.

be a creature (not of the same nature as the Father) or that “the very Word would not be really identical to creaturely *logoi*.”⁴³ Instead, he proposes that the identity between Word and the *logoi* of things is that of hypostatic identity: “The Logos becomes and is the ‘is’ of both uncreated and created natures.”⁴⁴ In other words, the hypostatic act of being of the Word is, necessarily, that same act of being which is possessed by anything God creates. In combining these two claims, Wood extends the reasoning of Hart in terms of incarnation: if God is omnipotent and perfectly loving, he necessarily creates the universe; and, since God necessarily creates by means of his *Logos*, and what it is to create by means of the *Logos* involves subsisting by means of the hypostasis of the Word, the universe necessarily subsists by means of hypostatic “identity” with his Word.

I have severe reservations about the coherence of Wood’s claims about “identity” between *logoi* and Logos. Wood at times tries to differentiate his view from that of pantheism. Since Wood defines a “crude pantheism” as the view that God and the world are identical in *nature*, it clearly follows that Wood’s claim about the Word being “hypostatically identical to every created nature, even Being itself”⁴⁵ does not imply pantheism of *that* sort. Yet, if the Word’s hypostasis were “identical” with the act of being of every individual, such that everything that exists were in hypostatic union with the Word in exactly the way that Christ’s human nature is so united, then, following the Christological doctrines about the hypostatic union, it would be simply follow that everything *is* God.⁴⁶ And Wood at times endorses such language, claiming that his views entail “that God . . . must really *be* all things.”⁴⁷ Conversely, if Christ were hypostatically identified with everything in the same way as with his human nature, then it follows that there is more than one hypostasis or person in Christ, since each human being constitutes a distinct hypostasis and nevertheless is supposed to be hypostatically identical with Christ—Wood’s vision would entail Nestorianism writ cosmic. Wood is unclear in making qualifications that would be needed to avoid these conclusions, and if these qualifications were made, it is also unclear to me whether his position would be coherent.⁴⁸

⁴³ Wood, *WMC*, 90.

⁴⁴ Wood, *WMC*, 92.

⁴⁵ Wood, “Creation Is Incarnation,” 99.

⁴⁶ Aquinas, for example, is aware of and rejects such views that God’s act of being is the act of being of everything that exists as heretical forms of pantheism; see *Summa Theologiae* [*ST*] I, q. 3, a. 8.

⁴⁷ Wood, *WMC*, 223.

⁴⁸ To charitably construe Wood, we would have to say that the Word is not in hypostatic

Radical Kenoticism and the Hart/Wood Strategy

The strategy endorsed by Hart and Wood has parallels throughout the contemporary theological literature. The remote antecedent of their views is Karl Barth's famous thesis that there is no *logos asarkos*, no pre-existent Logos that is not already the incarnate Christ.⁴⁹ Modern Barthians have been hotly debating these issues about God's freedom in creation and their relation to the pre-temporal election in Jesus Christ.⁵⁰ Bruce McCormack is the most prominent defender of a radical reading of this doctrine, deducing from the fact that the Word does not pre-exist his Incarnation that the Word

union with all things in the same way that the Word is in union with his human nature. Wood seems to appeal to claims that Christ is not an "individual" at times, and maybe that he is the "*logos* of hypostasis" for each thing (*WMC*, 95) while not sharing one hypostasis with every created thing. We can cash this out by noting that Wood at times claims that there is a *potential* hypostatic unity between God and the world, which is going to be achieved eschatologically: "The end of the world is hypostatic identity between God and the world" (109). On this reading, the universe is *not yet* in any actual hypostatic identity with Christ. All things are "united" (in some way) *potentially* to the hypostasis of Christ from their creation but require the historical Incarnation to fully actualize what they already are, since created things by themselves lack the divine nature (126). Thus, the idea is that the Word is necessarily in a *potential* union with all things, given his necessary causal role in creation. But notice that this charitable reading would not support the conclusions that Wood draws from his premises. If the Word is merely united to things as the principle of their being, as potentially united to them, it would be false that they are "already" hypostatically united to the Word. So, on the charitable reading, it would not follow that creation is incarnation in the sense that Wood gives to that slogan: the inference would be false that, if God creates, then God necessarily (or, "inevitably") becomes incarnate, as it would follow only that the Word is *potentially* incarnate in any world he creates. And being potentially incarnate is not "inevitably" to become incarnate. Although, if creation is literally in the future to be assumed into hypostatic union with the Son, one runs again into the same problematic metaphysics noted above—Nestorianism, pantheism, etc.—even if only at a future time.

⁴⁹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. IV/2 (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 33–34; Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. III/1, §41 (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 54–56.

⁵⁰ For a brief overview of views, see: Matthias Gockel, *Barth and Schleiermacher on the Doctrine of Election: A Systematic-Theological Comparison* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); George Hunsinger, "Election and the Trinity: Twenty-Five Theses on the Theology of Karl Barth," *Modern Theology* 24 (2008): 179–98; Kevin W. Hector, "Immutability, Necessity and Triunity: Towards a Resolution of the Trinity and Election Controversy," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 65 (2012): 64–81; Bruce McCormack, "Election and the Trinity: Theses in Response to George Hunsinger," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 63 (2010): 203–24; Robert W. Jensen, "Once More the *Logos asarkos*," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 13, no. 2 (2011): 130–33.

is somehow *constituted* in his personal identity by his relation to the Incarnation. McCormack, for example, argues that the Chalcedonian definition of the unity of natures in Christ's person or hypostasis involved a deep *aporia*: "[Since] Jesus of Nazareth contributes nothing to the constitution of the 'person,' . . . he stands in no real relation to the Logos. The Logos has a certain relation to him, . . . but Jesus has no constitutive relation to the Logos."⁵¹ What is missing is therefore a *mutual* relation between the human nature of Christ and his divine nature, which is to be resolved (McCormack argues) by holding that the Incarnation *affects* the being of the divine person.⁵²

McCormack advocates what I have referred to as "radical kenoticism," as he denies the traditional doctrine on which the divine nature is impassible. Hart and Wood, with many others, think there is something wrong with those views. Hart holds that the notion of divine passibility is literally incoherent, "[occupying] the same logical space as the idea of a square circle or of a married bachelor or of an intelligent and morally sane supporter of Donald Trump."⁵³ Yet Hart, directly engaging with McCormack, notes that their positions aim at the same conclusion: "The economy of creation and salvation is not something accidental or additional to the eternal *taxis* of the Trinity."⁵⁴ This summarizes well that the Hart/Wood strategy proposes to conclude to a *mutual* non-contingent relation between God and the world, which is grounded not upon a denial of divine impassibility (*viz.* radical kenoticism), but upon facts about God's character. These facts could not have been otherwise, as they are fundamentally facts about God's moral character. Those facts are also supposed to entail that creation uniquely reflects God's nature.

What sets apart Hart/Wood-type strategies is that they propose a *mutual* non-contingent relation between God and the world: not only does the universe reflect God's glory, but God's glory could not be expressed except in *this* universe. The strong modal claim of the Hart/Wood strategy secures this mutual relation only if it is construed as entailing that there is a *unique* universe that God wills. While I have already responded to those objections that God having alternative possibilities in creation would require "imagining" God as a finite agent, or God's selection of one universe over another being

⁵¹ Bruce McCormack, *The Humility of the Eternal Son: Reformed Kenoticism and the Repair of Chalcedon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 31.

⁵² McCormack, *Humility of the Eternal Son*, 295–96.

⁵³ Hart, *TT*, 67.

⁵⁴ Hart, *TT*, 66.

arbitrary,⁵⁵ Hart has a clear motivation in arguing that God cannot do otherwise than express his character in a way that “perfectly” reveals who God is. If there were other universes which expressed God’s goodness equally well as our universe, the relation between God and world would not be as strong as Hart want it to be. Specifically, each possible world would non-contingently reflect God’s goodness, wisdom, and so forth, but the relation would not be mutual on God’s side. That is, it would not be true that this world was *non-contingently* “elected” *within* the immanent, intra-Trinitarian life. This is then the sense in which a possible world, if it were not that *unique* world God necessarily creates, would not “perfectly” reflect the relations between the triune persons.

Two Motivations for the Strategy

There are then two implicit motivations for the Hart/Wood strategy. A first motivation is Trinitarian. In his response to McCormack, Hart is explicit as to how strong this modal claim needs to be to secure certain Trinitarian truths: “The taxis of the economic Trinity must be *identical* to that of the immanent.”⁵⁶ If the relations between God and the world are to be *mutually* non-contingent, making the decision to create the universe a necessary result of the intra-Trinitarian relations is simply a logical requirement of the view. Thus, for Hart, the payoff is that creation can be nothing other than “divine being repeating itself differently, in the mode of the contingent.”⁵⁷ Wood too aims at affirming an identity between the economic creation and redemption and the intra-Trinitarian life: “If the principle of creation *ex nihilo* is manifest and actualized in the very event of the historical Incarnation, . . . [then Christ is] the fundamental and concrete identity of every formal principle and every possible instance.”⁵⁸ That is, Wood reasons that, if an incarnate Christ is the principle by which creation is possible, then creation necessarily involves incarnation. And Wood concludes that this entails that his account would involve *denying* that “[the]Word is somehow more or differently immanent or present to Christ than he is in the *logoi* of every creature.”⁵⁹ The payoff of the account is, then, that Word’s hypostatic identity with everything is total, the Word being no more present in Christ Jesus than in a mulberry tree.

A second motivation is soteriology. Hart argues: “Nothing can become anything but what in some sense it already is, at least *in potentia*. Nothing can

⁵⁵ Hart, *TT*, 69.

⁵⁶ Hart, *TT*, 69 (emphasis mine).

⁵⁷ Hart, *TT*, 63.

⁵⁸ Wood, *WMC*, 221.

⁵⁹ Wood, *WMC*, 216.

become something wholly extrinsic to its nature; something can become only what it is.”⁶⁰ Otherwise, Hart proposes, that transformation would be annihilation, a substantial change in kind membership. Thus, “every rational nature is already potentially infinite in its embrace of the divine nature, . . . divinity is itself an inherent possibility of humanity—an inherent property, in fact, even if in only potential form.”⁶¹ Wood endorses the same argument and holds that divinization actualizes a “potential” *specifically for the Word* that is already “innate” in all nature— “[The] Word, the Logos . . . is the very potency of all things”⁶²— and that “grace names a power equally ‘implanted’ in all, . . . innate, present from the beginning *in potentia*.”⁶³ If there were no such potential, they both argue, we would be stuck with a “two-tier” system in which grace and nature are related only extrinsically and contingently.

The traditional and orthodox account affirms neither of these sets of claims made by Hart and Wood, in the sense that they advocate them. There are very good reasons for not doing so, as both sets of motivations rest on specious inferences. Much hinges on the ambiguous and unclear use of terms such as “identical to” or “potential.” It is unclear why we should accept, first, that creation could not reveal the Trinitarian life except if it were uniquely elected within God’s own immanent life and God could do nothing other. There is nothing in traditional and orthodox doctrine which would imply that, if God is contingently related to the world and could have done otherwise than create this universe, then the universe does not necessarily and essentially depend upon God for what/that it is. Traditionally, theologians who accept that God could have not created the world have also explicitly accepted that the world reflects God’s goodness and wisdom, and indeed bears traces of the Trinitarian persons.⁶⁴ Nor do traditional doctrines deny that “we can have no knowledge of who God is in himself apart from” salvation history.⁶⁵ Why is it the case that the *taxis* in creation must be *identical* to the *taxis* in the inner life of the Trinity? That God could have

⁶⁰ Hart, *TT*, 72–73.

⁶¹ Hart, *YG*, 24, 26.

⁶² Wood, *WMC*, 299n25.

⁶³ Wood, *WMC*, 130. Wood appeals to *Amb. ad Ioan.* 10.46, where Maximus claims that “in all human beings God has placed the same power that leads naturally to salvation, so that anyone who wishes is able to lay claim to divine grace.” But it seems the latter part of the clause cannot be coherently read as Wood would have it, which is that what is naturally implanted is the grace itself. Instead, what Maximus likely means is that each person has, by nature, free will, which enables them to lay hold of grace.

⁶⁴ For extended discussion, see Thomas Joseph White, *The Trinity* (Washington, DC: Catholic University Press, 2022), 547–87, 598–604.

⁶⁵ Hart, *TT*, 66.

“expressed” himself in another cosmic history of salvation *equally well* does not entail that all such expressions are *equally bad* or *inadequate* to express the Trinitarian persons to us.

Wood is explicit in endorsing that it is constitutive of the Word’s being that he become incarnate and one with all things: Christ’s hypostasis is “a whole irreducible to and yet *constituted by* its parts.”⁶⁶ This puts Wood’s views explicitly in line with those of McCormack. Yet Wood implies that the tradition affirms only that the *divine nature* undergoes no *temporal change* in virtue of its relation to creation.⁶⁷ Thus, he believes these two qualifications allow him to maintain divine impassibility, unlike McCormack. As long as the persons are such that, from eternity, they necessarily proceed from the Father in producing the world, and do not “depend” on the world to perfect their divine being, then their position that the persons or God can do no other than produce the world might seem orthodox. Wood therefore denies that there is a person of Christ that exists independently of the Incarnation, given that Christ’s person is constituted by his relation to the world. Christ as Logos does not exist “prior to his humanity,” that is, prior to the hypostatic union with a created human nature. Rather, the union is one that has occurred from eternity, such that the Word has always been necessarily incarnate and united in his hypostasis with human nature.⁶⁸ Wood proposes that the Word’s “procession into creatures” as their *logoi* is not the procession of “the ineffable divine nature,” but nevertheless that the procession is constitutive of the hypostasis of the Son: “Creation ‘in the Word’ is really linked to his distinctive personhood.”⁶⁹

Recall: it is true that, necessarily, if God is incarnate, God is incarnate. But this relation need not be necessary, even if the relation among these propositions is necessary, since whether that relation is necessary depends on other factors. For example, whether it is necessary that God becomes incarnate depends on whether God *chooses* to become incarnate. If God’s choice to become incarnate is contingent, and could have been otherwise,

⁶⁶ Wood, *WMC*, 49 (emphasis mine). It is noteworthy that Wood’s citation of Maximus on this point involves no such claim about “constitution” of the *hypostasis*: “Apart from the one hypostasis these realities which differ from each other in their natural principle could never exist, and you could never in any way know them separately [from the hypostasis]” (Maximus, Epistle 12 [*PG*, 91:484B], trans. in *WMC*, 246n57). Maximus’s point is plainly that the *natures* would not exist or be knowable without the hypostasis in which they subsist, not that the Word’s hypostasis would not exist without his human nature.

⁶⁷ Wood, *WMC*, 92, 98–101.

⁶⁸ Wood, *WMC*, 58.

⁶⁹ Wood, *WMC*, 268n134; see also 89–91.

then it is contingently the case that God becomes incarnate. God is contingently incarnate even if it is true from eternity that God is incarnate (given God's existence outside of time), since the facts about God being outside of time do not make that relation one that could not have been otherwise. If it were true that God could have chosen, from eternity, not to be incarnate, then God is not necessarily incarnate, even though there was no "moment" in God's eternal life that he was not incarnate.⁷⁰

Conversely, then, Wood's denials that there is any "temporal change" involved in the Incarnation are nothing more than logical sleight of hand. If the Incarnation were *de re* necessary and could not be otherwise, then it is clear (as Wood says) that the person of the Word is constituted, in part, by relation to his human nature, as the metaphysical basis for what makes it true that God could do no other than create and become incarnate. The same is true of Hart's position. If the historical drama of creation and salvation is the unique perfect expression of the divine nature, given the character of God and the Trinitarian relations, then that drama is constitutive of the Trinity, in the sense that each of the persons would not be who they are except by electing to create and redeem the world.

As McCormack recognized, however, these doctrines do not sit with Chalcedonian orthodoxy. Professed Chalcedonian orthodoxy and the teaching of its proponents, such as St. Cyril of Alexandria, do not reject merely *temporal* changes, but also that there is any respect in which Christ's temporal birth from Mary is *constitutive* of his person alongside his birth from the Father.

Cyril rules out the view that Christ has a hypostasis which is constituted, even partially, by its relation to creation and birth from Mary.⁷¹ In one of his letters to Nestorius, Cyril notes that the Son did not need "a second generation for its own sake after its generation from the Father."⁷² Cyril (in the first letter to Succensus) uses this metaphysics to give precise content to his conclusion that the Son of God became man by his "gracious economy" and not by necessity of who he is. The Son is not the Son in relation

⁷⁰ This distinction seems elided by the otherwise brilliant Herbert McCabe, in his "The Involvement of God," *New Blackfriars* 66, no. 785 (1985): 464–76.

⁷¹ See Cyril of Alexandria, *Scholia on the Incarnation* 11 (PG, 75:784–85). John Henry Newman also reads Cyril this way in "On Cyril's Formula," in *Tracts Theological and Ecclesiastical*, new impression (London: Longmans and Green, 1908), 358–83.

⁷² "Second letter of Cyril to Nestorius," in *St. Cyril of Alexandria. The Christological Controversy, Its History, Theology, and Texts* (Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press: 2004), 264.

to the world.⁷³ That doctrine is not idiosyncratic to Cyril. Pope Leo's *Tome* briefly adds as an aside that "[Christ's] nativity which took place in time took nothing from, and added nothing to that divine and eternal birth."⁷⁴ Leo's *Tome* was endorsed by Chalcedon.⁷⁵ The Chalcedonian doctrines aim to preserve an asymmetric relation, such that, even though the Son's hypostasis is composite as subsisting in two natures, the Son's hypostasis does not acquire a *metaphysically necessary* relation to the human nature it informs.⁷⁶ In sum: the begetting of Christ in time does not add or subtract from Christ's begetting in eternity. Thus, the "added to" or "received" in Pope Leo's *Tome* is not a claim about change over time, but ontological constitution. The point of such condemnations is that the Son remains the same *person* he was logically/metaphysically independent of the Incarnation. The Son is who he is *purely* in relation to the Father, without reference to his temporal begetting.

For that reason, the Fourth Council of Constantinople taught that "[Christ] has not received from himself that he has been made, nor in any way whatsoever from anyone else; . . . he is alone, ever existing without beginning, and eternal, ever the same and like to himself."⁷⁷ If Christ's hypostatic being bears a real relation to creation such that his relation to creation constitutes who he is, the Son would *receive* from creation his own hypostatic being; if the begetting of the Son involved as an essential term the Incarnation and assuming a human nature, the Father would be communicating a nature that is not identical with his own.

John Damascene is therefore careful to caution that the doctrine that Christ had a "composite hypostasis" affirms only that the person *subsists* in two natures and *not* that the begetting of the Son in eternity has a necessary relation to or is partially constituted by his human nature. Thus, "the divine subsistence of God the Word existed before all else and is without time and eternal, simple and uncompound."⁷⁸ Christ is in no way composite

⁷³ Newman, "On Cyril's Formula," 352–58.

⁷⁴ Leo I, *Letter to Flavius*, trans. Charles Lett Feltoe, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* [NPNF], 2nd ser., vol. 12, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature, 1895); in Migne, *PL*, 54: 756).

⁷⁵ Endorsement which arguably has theological weight; see Thomas Weinandy and Daniel Keating, eds., *The Theology of Cyril of Alexandria: A Critical Appreciation* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2003).

⁷⁶ Note that Maximus accepts versions of this claim in *Ambigua ad Thomam* 5.11 and *Amb. ad Ioan.* 36.2, 42.20.

⁷⁷ Norman Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 1 (London: Sheed and Ward, 1990), 161.

⁷⁸ John of Damascus, *De fide orthodoxa* 3.7, trans. E. W. Watson and L. Pullan, in *NPNF*,

in his begetting, but remains *simple* in his hypostasis. Christ's hypostatic subsistence is compound only in virtue of coming to *subsist in* a human nature at a point in time, not composite from eternity in its relation to the Father.⁷⁹ Damascene distinguishes that Christ's human nature was an "instrument" of his divine nature and person, not an integral constituent of that person: "His divinity communicates its own glories to the body while it remains itself without part in the sufferings of the flesh. For His flesh did not suffer through His divinity in the same way that His divinity energised through the flesh. For the flesh acted as the instrument of His divinity."⁸⁰

Unsurprisingly, Maximus the Confessor is aware of and endorses these doctrines. Maximus holds that the Word's hypostasis remains *simple*, constituted solely by its relation to the Father from eternity. While the Son's human nature was "enhypostatic" apart from its union with the Word, the Word is *pre*-hypostatized in his divine nature before the Incarnation and undergoes no change in becoming man. "Not two hypostases (that is, persons) because, both before assuming the flesh and after, he will have remained one and the same."⁸¹ This is not merely a claim that the Godhead underwent no temporal changes. Maximus is affirming that the Word has no metaphysically necessary relation to the Incarnation, because the Word is complete in his hypostatic identity solely in terms of his eternal begetting from the Father and not in terms of his being born from Mary.

And there are good theological reasons for accepting that the Word is not constituted by his relation to his human nature or to creation more generally. Classical Trinitarian theology holds that the persons of God and the divine nature are only *conceptually* distinct; the persons are *really identical* with the divine nature. We find this claim in Western authors such as Augustine,⁸² Boethius,⁸³ Aquinas,⁸⁴ but in Eastern authors too going back to Athanasius.⁸⁵ This claim that the persons are identical with the divine nature is simply another way of stating that the persons are of one essence and differ *only* in

2nd Series, vol. 9, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature, 1899).

⁷⁹ See *ST* III, q. 2, a. 4, resp.

⁸⁰ John of Damascus, *De fide orthodoxa* 3.15. Aquinas explains the difference between the Nestorian and Orthodox claim in *ST* III, q. 2, a. 6, esp. resp. and ad 4.

⁸¹ Maximus, Epistle 12 (PG, 91:467–70); trans. mine.

⁸² Augustine, *De Trinitate* 6.7.

⁸³ Boethius, *De Trinitate* 1.

⁸⁴ *ST* I, q. 39, a. 1.

⁸⁵ See Athanasius, *Four Discourses Against the Arians* II, trans. by John Henry Newman and Archibald Robertson, in *NPNF*, 2nd ser., vol. 4, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature, 1892), ch. 21.

terms of their relation of origin. The persons are distinct not in their divine nature, but only in hypostasis (i.e., relation of origin), being of one essence with each other. The divine nature is “multiplied” in terms of the way in which the one nature is related to itself, not in terms of multiple instantiations of the nature.⁸⁶ In orthodox Trinitarian theology, the Trinitarian relations could not be otherwise precisely because they are relations of the divine nature. Those processions within God’s life are nothing more than relations of the divine nature to itself.⁸⁷ A person is constituted as a relation of the one divine nature, and no person could “contingently” be God.

Consequently, there is good reason to reject the Wood/Hart strategy if one adheres to Chalcedonian orthodoxy and classical Trinitarian theology. If the Son had a metaphysically necessary relationship to creation given his hypostasis and his identity as a divine person, then *what it is for the Son to be divine*, to share in the divine nature of the Father, *is to be incarnate as a human*. In what way, then, would the divine and human natures be distinguished, if the Son’s very mode of communicating in the divine nature is to assume human nature? It becomes impossible to cash out any way in which the Incarnation is not “essential” to the divine nature if the hypostatic being of the Son *could not have been otherwise* than related to creation. If the Father, for example, in his begetting the Son also were necessarily to beget the world, then either the Son is not consubstantial with the Father (if the divine nature of the Father does not involve incarnation), or the Father too would have a divine nature essentially related to the world, since the Father too is constituted as a “father” in terms of his begetting the Son.⁸⁸

Wood, for example, defends his rejection of the pre-existent hypostasis of the Word (and the implication that it is constituted by those natures in which it subsists) on account of the way in which hypostases are not the same as natures. A hypostasis has no nature, no essential properties, and so Wood repeats that the hypostasis of the Word bears “absolutely no formal content as such.”⁸⁹ Since hypostases in general bear no nature or essential properties, Wood reasons, a necessity attaching to the Word’s Incarnation in virtue of his hypostasis does not constitute anything problematic. Wood, then, makes a move similar theoretically to Hart’s appeal to volitional necessities: the necessity that attaches to the hypostasis of Christ being eternally and

⁸⁶ See, e.g., Gregory Nazianzus, *Oration 29*.

⁸⁷ See White, *Trinity*, 409–55, 547–87; see also *ST I*, q. 39, a. 1.

⁸⁸ Refusing to call the relation to the world “natural” or “essential” to the divine nature is merely to reinforce a nominal distinction that makes no ontological difference, since this God–world relation is metaphysically necessary (could not have been otherwise).

⁸⁹ Wood, *WMC*, 93.

necessarily divine/human is not a *natural* necessity, and thus (Wood thinks) would not compromise anything essential to the divine nature.

What Wood confuses, however, is the fact of *what* a hypostasis *is* with the *way* in which a *divine* hypostasis is *constituted* as having a given hypostatic identity. It is true that a hypostasis is not a nature. It is not true, in God, that a hypostasis could be anything other than the divine nature itself, communicated in a distinct mode. That is, it is not true that the hypostasis of the Word could be *constituted qua hypostasis*, as a mode of subsistence of the *divine* nature, except in terms of relations to the divine nature itself. It is literally impossible to make sense of the metaphysics on which a person of the Trinity would be constituted by relation both to creation and to the other persons, since this entails either that the Son is a creature or that creation is a divine (where creation constitutes a distinct divine person or, as Wood might hold, the very person of the Word).

Even when it comes to the key proof text for Wood's view that "creation is incarnation," (*Ambiguum* 7), Maximus does not support Wood's identification of *logoi* with Logos in such a way as to carry these sorts of radical implications that the Word is constituted by or identical with the *logoi*. When Maximus notes that "the many *logoi* are one Logos," he follows immediately by saying that "all things are related to Him without being confused with Him . . . [because] from all eternity, He contained within Himself the pre-existing *logoi* of created beings."⁹⁰ Notice that, if the *logoi* "pre-exist" the creatures of which they are *logoi*, then the Word being identical with the *logoi* would not entail that the Word is identical with the creatures whose *logoi* they are. Instead, they are more closely akin to divine ideas, principles *by which* God creates or in virtue of which things are created. It does not follow from the existence of such principles that the Word's hypostasis is identical with or a constituent of the hypostasis of every created entity. Simply put, Maximus's claims here and elsewhere do not support Wood's metaphysical extrapolations. And, in fact, Maximus otherwise seems to flatly contradict Wood's views in explaining that we become the body of Christ "not by losing our bodies and becoming his, *nor because he passes into us in his person* or is divided up in our members."⁹¹ That is, Maximus rejects that the Word's hypostasis is our own, even through grace.

As to the second soteriological motivation, the argument Hart gives rests on an ambiguous principle that "nothing can become anything but what in

⁹⁰ Maximus the Confessor, *Amb. ad Ioan.* 7.15.

⁹¹ Maximus the Confessor, *Chapters on Knowledge* 84, in *Selected Writings*, trans. George Berthold (Toronto: Paulist Press, 1985), 165–66 (emphasis mine).

some sense it already is, at least *in potentia*.” Interpreted straightforwardly, as unrestricted and applying to anything at all, this principle *would* apply to changes across kind membership. But then the principle seems false. A rock is potentially able to be crafted into a clock, but nothing in the rock is already a clock *in potentia*. The rock lacks any natural principles by which it could become a clock. If we restrict the principle to accidental changes, the principle also seems false. The fact that you could become blind does not mean that you are already blind *in potentia*. The latter implies that you already possess the property by reason of what you are, by your natural principles, which is false of properties like blindness. It is true that you could lose your sight. But it would occur by extrinsic agency and blindness in you would constitute an accidental property; it is not *natural* for human beings to be blind.

Theologically speaking, the claims that Wood and Hart make about grace being present *in potentia* are ambiguous and, if taken literally and in the sense in which they would involve radical implications, look straightforwardly incoherent. Hart deduces from the above principle that divinity is an “inherent property” of humanity, which is what undergirds his claims that human beings are “always already divine.”⁹² It is obvious that, if divinity were literally speaking “natural” to us, then we are by nature divine. Yet it looks incoherent to say what it is to be potentially God, in the sense of having a nature which is divine but where your divinity is not fully “in act.” Hart himself notes: “like any number of other predicates—infinity, eternity, simplicity, immutability—the term impassibility is merely one of the necessary entailments of the very concept of God as the transcendent source of all reality.”⁹³ Yet, you (the reader) should readily admit you are neither infinite, eternal, simple, nor immutable; you are not the transcendent source of all reality. And, given that to be God is to be these things *necessarily*, it does not look possible for anything to have these properties *naturally* but *in potentia*.

Again, appealing to Hart and Wood’s own sources, Maximus the Confessor argues that “nature does not [come to] possess the principles of realities that transcend nature.”⁹⁴ Maximus cannot make sense of the idea that divinization is the actualization of a natural faculty or capacity to live the divine life, as this entails that we are naturally divine:

⁹² Hart, *YG*, 16.

⁹³ Hart, *TT*, 67.

⁹⁴ Maximus the Confessor, *Quaestiones ad Thalassium* 59.8, in *Maximus, On Difficulties in Sacred Scripture: the Responses to Thalassios*, trans. Maximos Constas (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2018).

[Grace] finds no faculty or capacity of any sort within nature that could receive it, for if it did, it would no longer be grace but the manifestation of a natural activity latent within the potentiality of nature. And thus, again, what takes place would no longer be marvelous if divinization occurred simply in accordance with the receptive capacity of nature. Indeed it would rightly be a work of nature, and not a gift of God, and a person so divinized would be God by nature and would have to be called so in the proper sense.⁹⁵

Wood's qualification that the Word is hypostatically identical with but not a constituent of the nature of things, or that the potential for grace is not a "natural" potential but a "hypostatic" one, seems to be a distinction without a difference. As Wood himself notes, "there is no such thing as a generic or universal created nature existing somewhere other than in the created hypostases that bear and exemplify it."⁹⁶ An *innate* potential does not seem distinct from a *natural* potential, since hypostases have no innate/intrinsic power/potential except in virtue of the natures that they instantiate.

Conclusion: The Hart/Wood Strategy Fails by Its Own Standards

Hart and Wood derive their metaphysics from Bulgakov, whose views were criticized by other Orthodox theologians, including Florovsky, as entailing a pantheistic approach to creation—and Bulgakov's views remain, for this reason, condemned by the Russian Orthodox Church.⁹⁷ There seem to be good reasons for this decision. Florovsky was a vehement opponent of Bulgakov's metaphysics, as Florovsky was keen to insist that there was a logic in the Orthodox insistence that God was free *not to create*. This claim ensures that the relation between God's inner life and his creation is a contingent one rather than necessary, which would be akin to a Trinitarian relation.⁹⁸

David Bradshaw lends historical support to Florovsky's perspective, showing that, beginning with Athanasius, there is a distinction between

⁹⁵ Maximus, *Amb. ad Joan.* 20.2.

⁹⁶ Wood, *WMC*, 151–52.

⁹⁷ For an overview, see Alexis Klimoff, "Georges Florovsky and the Sophiological Controversy," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 49, no. 1/2 (2005): 67–100; Klimoff, "On the Sophiological Controversy of the 1930s," *ROCOT Studies*, March 25, 2017, rocot-studies.org/2019/09/03/georges-florovsky-and-the-sophiological-controversy/.

⁹⁸ See Georges Florovsky, "Creation and Creaturehood," in *Collected Works*, vol. 3, *Creation and Redemption* (Belmont, MA: Nordland, 1976), 46–48; "St. Athanasius' Concept of Creation," *Studia Patristica* 6 (1962), 36–57.

creation, which proceeds by God's "good pleasure" (by which Athanasius seems to mean precisely *contingent* choice), and the Trinitarian persons, who proceed naturally (and necessarily, as what God is): "If it had pleased God not to create any creatures (*ei doxan ên tōi theōi mē poiēsai ta genēta*), the Logos nevertheless would be with God, and the Father would be in Him."⁹⁹ Basil the Great similarly rejects that God's act of creation was "without choice (*aprobairētōs*), as the body is the cause of shadow and light the cause of brightness."¹⁰⁰ Gregory Palamas represents the Orthodox tradition in his arguments that collapsing the distinction between necessity and choice in the divine will would make the world naturally divine in some way, just as the persons of the Trinity are naturally divine.¹⁰¹

While it is true that Hart (like Wood) is careful to note that "this world has nothing whatsoever to do with the true God and is no part of who he is or of who they are,"¹⁰² the logic of the position undermines such claims. If God's essence makes it such that God could not do otherwise than create, God's choice to create is essential or natural to him. God's choice to create is no more or less free than the begetting of the Son or spiration of the Spirit.¹⁰³ That is just to say that the world *necessarily follows* from what and who God is—since the world literally *could not have been otherwise*, if not even God could have chosen to create a distinct world. The whole point of the Hart/Wood strategy is to argue that the non-contingent relation between the world and God is *mutual*. So, while it is true that (for Hart) the world depends on God and God does not depend on the world, it does not thereby follow that the world is not a part of what or who God is. In fact, it follows quite clearly that, if the world is non-contingently elected within God's intra-Trinitarian life, such that it follows necessarily from what the persons are like, then that election of the world is partially constitutive of the identities and relations among the persons.¹⁰⁴

Hart/Wood-type strategies for securing a unique God–world relation are logically indistinguishable from radical kenoticism. Their views have

⁹⁹ Athanasius, *Orations against the Arians* 2.31 (PG, 26:212B; NPNF, 2nd series, 4:364), cited in David Bradshaw, "Divine Freedom in the Greek Patristic Tradition," *Quaestiones Disputatae* 2, no. 1–2 (2011): 56–69.

¹⁰⁰ Basil, *Hexameron* 1.7, cited in Bradshaw, "Divine Freedom."

¹⁰¹ Tikhon Pino, *Essence and Energies: Naming and Being God in St. Gregory Palamas* (New York: Routledge, 2023), 121–23.

¹⁰² Hart, *YG*, 92.

¹⁰³ See Hart, *YG*, 128: "The perpetual dynamic synthesis of essence and existence in creatures is simply another inflection and expressive modality of God's life: the Father's co-equal expression in the Son and infinite delight in the Spirit." See also 116.

¹⁰⁴ For a similar point, see White, *Trinity*, 596–98.

no special advantage over views like that of McCormack, except that they hold that God at *no time* undergoes change. But it is not essential to radical kenotic views that God changes *in/over time*. Kenoticism requires only that God depends upon the world for who he is. Once one accepts the premise that there needs to be a *mutual* necessary relation between God and the world, one has accepted the existence of an *essential* or *natural* relation of God to the world. Such a relation is one in which who or what it is to be God requires the existence of that unique world which is eternally elected in God's life. Without that election, as Hart and Wood insist, God would not be the same God he is revealed to be in Christ. Yet, clearly, if this is true, the Hart/Wood strategy is simply identical with radical kenoticism. And, if radical kenoticism is unorthodox—as Hart/Wood confess that it is—their own position fares no better in representing orthodoxy. N.V