

Dr. Jim Spiegel, Philosophy of Religion, Session 16, Divine Incarnation and the Trinity

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This is Dr. James Spiegel in his teaching on the Philosophy of Religion. This is session 16, Divine Incarnation and the Trinity.

Okay, we're going to conclude this series by talking about a couple of doctrines that are central to Christian theism: the Divine Incarnation and the Trinity.

The reason we're going to do that is because some very interesting philosophical questions arise in the context of these doctrines. And they are doctrines that are central to Christian theology. So, we Christians need to be prepared to address these issues in a rigorous and philosophically informed way.

So, let's see what sorts of philosophical problems are related to these doctrines and how we might deal with them. The orthodox Christian view regarding the Divine Incarnation is that Jesus Christ is dual-natured but one person. He's both fully human and fully God, which immediately raises the question, how can this be logically coherent? How can someone be a God-man and truly remain divine while also being truly human? This is actually a problem that plagued the early church trying to work through this.

There were any number of heresies that emerged as some of the early church theologians tried to develop theories that could explain this in a rationally consistent way. First, let's note a three-fold distinction between contradictions, paradoxes and mysteries. A contradiction happens when one affirms and denies exactly the same proposition.

Whereas a paradox is an apparent but not real contradiction, something that looks like a contradiction but it's not. A mystery is a truth that cannot be grasped by human reason, which may or may not be paradoxical. So, when it comes to the doctrine of the divine incarnation, Thomas Morris has done tremendous work in dealing with some of these problems.

In a book he wrote about 30 years ago called *The Logic of God Incarnate*, it's tremendous, the best thing I've ever read on the topic. Thomas Morris went on to become a motivational speaker for Fortune 500 companies, particularly in ethics. And he's done some really good stuff there; a book he wrote called *If Aristotle Ran General Motors* is tremendous.

But I think he started giving talks to companies about business ethics back in the day, and he was such a hit, and he started commanding such a price that he no longer

needed his teaching position. But in addition to all that, he's a tremendous philosopher of religion. So, here's one of the distinctions that he makes between two senses of essence, and essence, is generally understood to be that without which a thing would not be what it is.

But there are two senses of essence that can be helpfully distinguished here. One is that of an individual essence as opposed to a kind essence. An individual essence is defined by all of the properties that are possessed by a particular thing.

Your individual essence is made up of all the qualities that you possess. That's what makes you, you. All these facts about you make you the particular thing or the particular person that you are.

As opposed to a kind essence, which is defined by all of the properties individually necessary and jointly sufficient for someone to be a member of a class or a kind, so you're not just a particular person with a unique individual essence. You also have a kind essence as a human being.

You possess all of the qualities and properties that are individually necessary and jointly sufficient for you to be a member of humankind. You're also a member of the mammalian kind. You have lungs.

You are the kind of entity that gives birth to live young. Or if you're a man, you are capable of participating in that in terms of impregnating someone who gives birth to live young. You have hair.

You have fingernails and toenails. You're a vertebrate. You have all of these qualities that you have to have in order to be a mammal, and if you do have all of them, that will guarantee that you are a mammal.

So, you're a member of the mammalian kind. And we can talk about all sorts of other classes and kinds that we humans are members of. It always has to do with satisfying certain conditions and having certain properties.

Individual essence and kind essence. There is a very important distinction there. Now, how does that relate to the divine incarnation? To say that Jesus Christ was one person with two natures is just to say that his individual essence, his unique essence as a particular person, was made up of all of the properties of a fully human-kind essence and a fully divine kind essence.

So, whatever it takes to be human, whatever those necessary conditions are, including having a human body, having a human soul, having a human mind, Jesus possessed all of those qualities, and whatever it takes to be divine, Jesus possessed all of those qualities too. He was omnipotent and omniscient, omnibenevolent, and

so on. And so, his individual essence was composed of all of the essential divine and human properties.

That's the idea. My graphic is not very sophisticated, but you get the idea. So that's where the distinction between individual and kind essence comes in handy when thinking about the divine incarnation.

Just to kind of clarify what we're talking about here. But it does raise an objection. Doesn't Jesus lack some properties that are necessary for being human? Right? He was not conceived by a human father.

Show me another human being who was not conceived by another human father. Well, that leads us to another distinction, and that is between common properties and essential properties. Common properties are those characteristics possessed by many or most members of a class or a kind, as opposed to an essential property.

Essential properties are those characteristics that must be possessed by a thing in order to be a member of a class or a kind. So I have two hands. Most people have two hands.

That's a common property for human beings. Some people only have one hand. Some people have no hands at all.

But they're still human beings. They just have this uncommon trait of not having two hands. But you have to have a mind to be human, however well-developed it is.

You have to have a mind. That's an essential property. So, not all common properties are essential properties.

So, when it comes to Jesus, he lacked the common but non-essential property of having been conceived by a human father. Right? Just because all or nearly all human beings happen to have a certain trait, it doesn't mean it's an essential trait. It's also the case that nearly every human being has had a belly button or a navel scar, which is so common we don't even think about our navel scars as scars.

If you've ever seen one, a person's belly, you know, in a rare case where they don't have a navel. I've heard of such instances because their umbilical cord, when it was removed, for whatever reason, healed so well they don't really have a belly button. It strikes people as, you know, peculiar or even disturbing, even though the fact is they're better healed than the rest of us.

They have less of a scar. Anyway, most people have a navel and a belly button, but that's a common property. It's not essential.

If you don't have one, it doesn't disqualify you as a human being. And so, it goes with Jesus not having been conceived by a human father. That's uncommon, but it doesn't disqualify him as a genuine human being because it's not essential to being human to be conceived by a human father in any case.

The first two human beings, Adam and Eve, if you suppose that they are historical, you know, actual historical people, they didn't have human father. And I suppose neither of them had a belly button either. So, there's going to have to be some first human beings, whoever they were, and, you know, they would have this uncommon but non-essential property of not being conceived by a human father.

Here's another objection, though. How could Jesus have been truly human when he possessed clearly divine properties? You know, he can walk on water. He reads people's minds.

He can heal people whenever he wants. This leads us to a third distinction, that between being merely human and being fully human. To be fully human, one need not be merely human.

One need only possess all the characteristics that are essential to humankind's essence. Jesus possessed all the necessary humankind properties, so he was fully human. But since he also possessed divine qualities, he was not merely human.

You don't have to be merely human to be fully human. Jesus was human, plus. Human plus infinity, as it turned out because he was human plus divine.

So, as long as there are no contradictions between essential human properties and divine properties, you don't have a problem here. I suppose the critic could look for potential contradictions there, but nobody's shown definitively that there's any kind of contradiction between Jesus' human nature and his divine nature. So anyway, he's fully human, but he's human plus divine.

He's so much more than human, too. But what about Jesus' statement that he did not know some things that God the Father knows? Specifically, the hour of his return. That's a very puzzling passage there in Matthew 24.

Isn't that problematic? Morris discusses a couple of strategies in relation to this problem. One is the Kenoticist approach that says, based on Philippians 2, that in emptying himself, Jesus gave up some of his divine qualities, including his omniscience. That would explain why he doesn't know the hour of his return.

But that seems to imply that he gave up his divinity. If you deny the omniscience of Jesus, it seems to be denying that he's divine. Another approach that may be better is the two-minds view.

It says that Jesus had two minds that bear an asymmetrical relation to each other, where one mind can omnisciently access the other, but not vice versa. This is the view that Morris is partial to. He makes the analogy of conscious and unconscious minds and computer hardware and software, where in each case, one has access to the other, but the other doesn't have access to the other.

Maybe that is what's going on. The problem here is that if Jesus had literally two minds, then how can he be said to be one person? I don't know what the solution is to that, the philosophical conundrum that's presented there in Matthew 24. It could be that it's a matter of Jesus's choice not to access information that the Father has regarding his return.

Maybe there's some other theory that works. But all that to say that even though we can diffuse certain objections and dismiss certain criticisms of the doctrine of the divine incarnation that claim that it's incoherent, there are still problems, there are still issues that arise in light of certain biblical texts that make it somewhat mysterious. So, I'd say the divine incarnation of that doctrine is at least a mystery, if not also a paradox, but not a contradiction.

So, let's move on now to the doctrine of the Trinity. The Orthodox Christian doctrine of God asserts that he is triune. This is inferred from a number of different passages that refer to the father and the son, the Holy Spirit as God.

Just one or two passages that refer to all three. Maybe the Great Commission in Matthew 28, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. Even though Jesus isn't explicitly aiming to teach and develop that doctrine right there, the fact that he makes that reference in the Great Commission is a pretty powerful pointer in this direction.

He got a number of other passages. Going back to the Old Testament, the use of the Hebrew term Elohim has a kind of plural sense to it, and other passages individually refer to the Holy Spirit, the Father, and the Son as divine. But from a philosophical standpoint, just how do we work this out consistently? How can God be both three and one? Isn't that a blatant contradiction? Well, it's important to note at the outset that the doctrine of the Trinity does not assert that God is three and one in the same sense.

He is one in one sense, and he's three in another. God is one being or substance or essence in three persons. So, claims from our Muslim friends that Christians are polytheists are mistaken.

They overlook this simple but important distinction of God being one in the sense of a being. He's one being but three persons. Here's a problem, though.

If Jesus is the Son of God, then how can he be one with God since God created him? Answer: Jesus was not created. He was begotten in a way that's analogous to something we know from human experience, and that is, as human beings beget children through procreation, I have four children. I didn't create any of them.

I was involved in the procreation. They were begotten, not made, through the union of my wife and me. That guaranteed the perpetuation of this humankind essence, which interestingly, I think, really parallels the divine trinity.

As the Son proceeds from the union, I'm sorry, this Holy Spirit proceeds from the union of the Father and Son, and you have a third person who's no less divine. Even though proceeding from the Father and the Son, and the Son is no less divine, though proceeding and begotten from God the Father. So, here are a couple of heretical extremes that we need to avoid.

One is modalism, the view that each person of the Trinity is a different mode or manifestation of God. The problem here is that that does not account for the genuine plurality of divine personhood that's indicated in scripture.

There are certain brands of Pentecostalism where this view is espoused, versions of modalism. Another heretical extreme is tritheism, the idea that each person of the Trinity is a distinct being. The problem here is that that's simply polytheism, which is unbiblical.

So, we need to avoid emphasizing the plurality to the exclusion of the oneness or emphasizing the oneness to the exclusion of the plurality. The orthodox view is a kind of mean between those extremes. Now, here's an important and helpful distinction that is philosophical distinction that can be helpful here, having to do with the distinction between the is of identity, and the is of predication.

The is of identity is used in a sense of being one and the same as. So, if I say that Jocasta is Oedipus's mother, what I'm saying is that they are one and the same person. To Oedipus's chagrin when he discovers that, all too late, he's actually married to his mother.

What a horrifying realization. As horrifying as it is, though, I never understood why he proceeds to tear his eyes out of his head. Why pull your eyes out of your eye sockets when you're upset about something? I guess there may be some cultural differences there.

Certainly, it's a tragic consequence. That's what is used in the sense of identity. When we want to say that something is one and the same as something.

Then, the is of predication is different. Here, we use the word is in the sense of having certain characteristics. So, if I say that Jocasta is blonde, I'm not saying that she's one and the same with blondness.

I'm saying that she has the characteristic of blonde hair. How is that helpful? The doctrine of the Trinity asserts that the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Spirit is God. That is, to use the word in the sense of predication rather than identity.

There is more to God than just the Father. There is more to God than just the Son, than just the Spirit. He is Father, Son, and Spirit.

Each of these persons of the Trinity has this characteristic of being divine. This can help avoid this implication. It would be very problematic that the Father is the Son or the Son is the Holy Spirit, or the Holy Spirit is the Father.

That's not true. They are distinct. Yet, they're all divine persons within the Godhead.

You might find that helpful. Those are just a few philosophical issues related to the divine incarnation and the Trinity.

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