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GOD, SUPERNATURAL KINDS, AND THE INCARNATION

Thinking about God often leads to thinking about ‘God’. And it has never been completely clear how best to understand this little English word. Traditionally, ‘God’ has been taken to be either a description or a name. However, a third option has recently captured the attention of philosophical theologians. It is claimed that just as one should think of, say, ‘humanity’ as a kind term, so one should think of ‘God’, or perhaps ‘divinity’, as a kind term. But given the tight link between semantics and metaphysics, if one is tempted to understand ‘humanity’ or ‘divinity’ as kind terms, then one will naturally begin to think of humanity and divinity as kinds. Characterizing divinity this way, a primary task of philosophical theology is to give a characterization of the divine kind-essence. In this paper, I want to consider the claim that divinity is profitably construed as a kind-essence, and argue that the way that this has typically been understood is not altogether adequate. I shall then present and develop an alternative understanding of this kind-essence approach that takes the analogy of ‘supernatural kinds’ and natural kinds much more seriously. I will conclude by considering some objections.

I. THE SEMANTICS OF ‘GOD’

The decision to think of divinity as a kind-essence suggests that we think of ‘divinity’, or even ‘God’, as a kind term, i.e. as a term that picks out a kind. In order to get a little clearer on what this comes to, let me contrast this sort of account of the meaning of ‘divinity’ or ‘God’ with two more traditional views of the semantics of ‘God’.

One natural way to understand the term ‘God’ is to take it as a definite description; this idea is often expressed by saying that ‘God’ can be understood as a title. And if one understands definite descriptions in the traditional Russellian way, this will mean taking the proposition ‘God exists’ to mean ‘There exists exactly one being who is omniscient, omnipotent, omnibenevolent, etc.’ Now of course the particular description that I just gave does not fall out of Russell’s theory of descriptions; but it seems clear that if ‘God’ is a definite description, and if we are trying to give an account of what the theist means by ‘God’, then those three ‘omni properties’ are certain to be the core of the description.

A second way of understanding 'God' is as a name.¹ Of course, if we understand names in the way Russell understood common proper names, then we are back to thinking of 'God' as a description. So I propose that for our purposes we understand names according to the causal theory and I will henceforth call this view the 'causal-names' theory. According to this view, a name, e.g. 'Jones', gets its meaning in virtue of an original baptismal act in which the person or object is dubbed 'Jones'. Future utterances of 'Jones' successfully pick out the individual so dubbed if there is the right kind of causal link between the current utterance and the original baptism.

In contrast to both of these approaches, is the kind-essence approach. As mentioned above, this view suggests that we think of 'God' as a kind term. Rather than describing some individual (as the description theory says) or naming an individual (as the causal-names theory says) the term 'God' is seen as designating a kind of thing. Of course, it might very well be that this kind is necessarily exemplified by at most one being; but that is not inconsistent with thinking of 'God' as a kind term and divinity as a kind-essence.

Before continuing, let me make two caveats: first, the kind-essence approach to divinity, or the semantics of 'God', is not intended as a strictly descriptive thesis reporting the way that believers use the term. Clearly, it is often the case that 'God' is used as a proper name, and possibly, it is at times used as a description. So the kinds theorist should be seen as offering an account of one of the uses of 'God' and then claiming that there is something enlightening or informative about this construal. The second caveat is that it will be awkward if in what follows I am limited to using 'God' as a kind-term since it is so often used as a name. Therefore, let me establish the following convention: whenever I intend to be using the term as a proper name, I will write it in all capital letters (i.e. as 'GOD'). When only the first letter is capitalized, I am intending the kind-term understanding.

But now a question arises: what kind of kind term are we talking about here? That is, to which of the various kinds of kinds are we thinking of divinity as analogous? Our choices include: functional kinds (e.g. mouse trap and chair), artifactual kinds (automobile and house), and natural kinds (e.g. water and tiger). Should we think of divinity along the lines of any of these or as a *sui generis* kind? Thomas Morris, a proponent of the kind essence approach, explains his view on this below. Since his is the most explicit discussion I know of, I will quote at some length.

It does not seem to be the case that both 'divinity' and 'humanity' are concept words... At least the term 'humanity' seems to be more like a natural-kind term than like such a concept word [as 'bachelor'].

¹ See William P. Alston, 'Referring to God', *The International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion*, xxiv (November 1988), 113–28, and reprinted in Alston's collection of essays *Divine Nature and Human Language* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), pp. 103–17.

According to one standard account of natural kinds, every such kind has an essence, a set of properties of underlying traits individually necessary and jointly sufficient for membership in the kind. We can understand both human nature and divine nature, or humanity and divinity, in a parallel fashion. Human nature comprises all those properties individually necessary and jointly sufficient for being human. No individual can be human without having each and every one of the properties essential to humanity. And likewise for divinity. For example, on the traditional doctrine of God, properties essential for divinity include omnipotence, omniscience, aseity, eternity and the like. No individual can be God without having all such properties.

In most cases, specifications of what properties are essential to particular kinds constitute what Stephen Swartz has called 'stable generalizations' – propositions which are necessarily true... but known only a posteriori. That is, in most cases, few nontrivial kind-essential properties are known to characterize particular kinds a priori. In this respect divinity seems to differ quite a bit from standard natural kinds. For the epistemic status of many if not all, of the known attributes essential to deity can be argued to be known to be such a priori. To this extent, 'divinity' is like a constructed concept word.²

So it is not quite clear whether Morris is thinking of the divine essence as analogous to a natural-kind essence. Or perhaps the answer is 'he is and he isn't.' It certainly looks as though Morris has in mind kind-essences as opposed to functional or artifactual essences. Yet he recognizes an important difference: many of the kind-essential features of divinity are knowable a priori, while the non-trivial essential properties of natural kinds are knowable only a posteriori. In a more recent essay, Morris makes even more explicit his view that there is an important parallel between divinity and natural kinds:

Divinity, or deity, I construe as analogous to a natural kind, and thus as comprising a kind-essence, a cluster of properties individually necessary and jointly sufficient for belonging to the kind, or in this case, for being divine. I take omnipotence and omniscience, for example, to be properties essential to deity... The picture of God I begin from thus holds that such properties as omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, eternity, moral perfection, and ontological independence must belong to any individual who is divine and must be had with the strongest possible modal status.³

Morris's view, then, is that divinity is like a natural-kind essence in that it is a collection of properties that are essential for anything to count as divine. Just as something must consist of two parts hydrogen and one part oxygen if it is to count as water, so any object must have all of the 'omni-properties' if it is to be God.

I will begin the next part of this paper with a critical evaluation of Morris's suggestion that we understand divinity as importantly analogous to natural

² Thomas V. Morris, *The Logic of God Incarnate* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), pp. 22–3.

³ Thomas V. Morris, 'The Metaphysics of God Incarnate', in Ronald J. Feenstra and Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., eds, *Trinity, Incarnation and Atonement: Philosophical and Theological Essays* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), pp. 110–27; the quotation is on p. 114.

kinds; I will argue that his way of applying the natural kind analogy is inadequate, and that it would be desirable to take the analogy with natural kinds even more seriously than Morris does. As we shall see, the resulting position offers some very interesting possibilities for solving Christological problems.

II. SUPERNATURAL KINDS

How are we to understand this claim that divinity is like a natural kind? Well, that all depends on how we understand natural kinds. And how are we to understand those? I think that some light can be shed on this by considering the semantics of natural-kind terms and then considering what this tells us about natural kinds themselves. We will then be in a position to understand more fully the thesis that divinity is a kind-essence in much the same way that, say, water is. Since it is clear that whatever divinity is, it isn't a *natural* kind, let's say that the thesis that there is an important parallel between the semantics of 'God' and natural-kind terms, and a corresponding parallel between natural kinds and the divine kind, is the thesis that divinity is a *supernatural* kind (I shall call this the 'SK thesis' for short).

Since the causal theory of natural-kind terms is very familiar to anyone even slightly familiar with contemporary philosophy of language, our discussion of it need not delay us long. As Putnam and Kripke have argued convincingly, the meaning of a natural-kind term like 'water' is not, as Locke had argued, its nominal essence.⁴ According to the Lockean descriptivist theory, the word 'water' simply means 'a clear, odourless, tasteless, potable liquid'. So it will follow that any substance which satisfies this description falls under the extension of 'water'. However, such an account is demonstrably wrong. This can be appreciated by means of the much-discussed 'Twin Earth' thought experiment. Suppose there is another planet somewhere (Twin Earth) that is very much like this one. This planet is so much like Earth that for every Earthling there is a Twin Earthling who looks, acts, sounds, and thinks just like he does. The only difference between the two planets is that the stuff that Twin Earthlings designate by uttering a word that sounds like 'water' is not H₂O but XYZ (however, H₂O and XYZ look, smell, and taste the same). So while I go to the faucet and pour myself a glass of water (i.e. H₂O), my twin pours himself a glass of XYZ. Suppose furthermore that the chemical nature of the stuff in our glasses is unknown to us; that is, suppose that it is not known by me that water is H₂O and not known by my twin that twin water is XYZ. Now the sixty-four dollar question is, Do the English word 'water' and the Twin English word 'water' mean the same thing? Intuitively it would seem that they do not. For my

⁴ See Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge, MA; Harvard University Press, 1972) and Hilary Putnam 'The Meaning of "Meaning"', reprinted in the second volume of Putnam's collected papers, entitled *Mind, Language, and Reality* (Cambridge University Press, 1975), pp. 215-71.

word picks out H_2O , while my twin's refers to XYZ. But since XYZ looks, smells, and tastes just like H_2O , the descriptivist theory will be committed to claiming that XYZ is water and that seems clearly wrong. Hence 'water' cannot be defined by its phenomenal qualities.

A further lesson to be gleaned from these cases is that what 'water' does mean is something like 'whatever is the same kind of stuff as this' where the indexical refers to an instance of water. Now of course, as a matter of contingent fact, it is in virtue of its nominal or phenomenal properties that we commonly distinguish water from other liquids. But such properties are not that in virtue of which a certain compound is water. And the story is precisely the same for other natural kinds, as well. What makes an animal a tiger is not its having stripes and being carnivorous; rather it is its having a certain genetic make-up.

With this account of natural-kind terms fresh in our minds, we now go back to what Morris says about divinity. As is clear from the quotations above, Morris thinks that the kind-essential attributes of divinity are omniscience, omnipotence, omnibenevolence and the rest of the omni-properties. And of course there is a good reason for seeing things this way. It has long been maintained that propositions such as

God is omnipotent

and

God is good

are *de dicto* necessary truths. Now one way of explaining why such truths are necessary is that divinity is a kind-essence and such properties constitute that essence. So it is not simply a matter of conceptual necessity that 'God is good' is necessarily true; rather it is a metaphysical necessity.

As well motivated as this way of construing the divine kind-essence may be, it can be seen to be fundamentally mistaken if one's working model of a kind-essence is that of natural kinds. Recall that what a term like 'water' picks out is not whatever might exemplify the class of properties that we use to distinguish water from other similar substances, nor anything with the set of attributes that water will typically or, if other things are equal, always exemplify. Rather water picks out a certain kind of substance, a certain chemical compound. The application of this to the case of divinity seems straightforward. To think of the term 'God' as meaning 'An omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent Creator of everything that exists other than Himself' is not to think of it as analogous to a natural-kind term at all. Rather, it is to accept a kind of descriptivism about supernatural kinds; the omni-properties are simply not the right sort of properties to serve to pick out a supernatural kind. Again, thinking of water as our example, the kind gets picked out by its material constitution, not by the other properties that tend to 'ride along' with that particular physical make-up. Now of course God is neither physical nor composite; so the supernatural kind of divinity will be

most unlike any natural kind. But that does not stop the semantics of 'God' from exhibiting the same general features of natural-kind terms. To follow this line of thought further, let's continue to think about water.

Besides having the essential property of being composed of two parts hydrogen and one part oxygen, water has various other attributes that I will call 'standard attributes'. A standard attribute is a property that an instance of a particular natural kind will commonly have, but which is not that in virtue of which the object is an exemplar of that kind.⁵ So standard properties of water include the aforementioned properties of odourlessness, colourlessness, tastlessness, etc. Among those standard properties of a kind, some are what I will call '*ceteris paribus* properties' and some are 'secondary-essential'. A *ceteris paribus* property is, as one might expect, a property that an instance of a kind will have if other things are equal. So, for example, water has the *ceteris paribus* property of boiling at 100 degrees Centigrade. However, if the water has salt added or is being heated in a high altitude, or if the laws of nature were different in certain ways, then this property is not exemplified. A secondary-essential property, on the other hand, is a property that, necessarily, any sample of a kind will have, but which is derivative on the nature of the substance. So, for example, the property of having the *ceteris paribus* property of boiling at 100 degrees Centigrade is what I call a 'secondary-essential' property of water.

According to the SK thesis, the way to think of the omni-properties is not as constitutive of the divine essence, but rather as standard attributes of divinity. For if we think of the divine essence as analogous to a natural-kind essence, then the essential properties of divinity will be those properties that constitute the nature of the divine essence. Now is it plausible to think that the omni-properties constitute the nature of God? I do not believe that it is. For surely the theist will want to say that it is in virtue of GOD's having the nature that He does, or being the sort of being that He is, that He is omnipotent, omniscient, and all the rest. Hence the omni-properties are not the lowest level properties of the divine essence, and so they are not well suited to be the identifying features of the supernatural kind of divinity.

So just as there are standard attributes of natural kinds, there are standard attributes of supernatural kinds. The traditional divine attributes can be thought of in exactly this fashion; they will tend to be exemplified by any being with a divine nature. But we can say something stronger yet, if we choose. Recall that we distinguished between two sorts of standard properties: *ceteris paribus* and secondary-essential. Any statement that attributes a property of the former type is clearly not a necessary truth since by definition there are possible circumstances in which that property will not be exemplified by objects of that kind. However, any true ascription of a

⁵ This notion of a 'standard property' is similar to, but slightly different from what Morris, in *The Logic of God Incarnate*, calls a 'common property'.

secondary-essential property will be a necessary truth. Now one might very well argue that attributes such as necessity, eternality, aseity, and omnipotence are secondary-essential; nothing that is of the divine substance could fail to exemplify them, they 'follow from' the essence in the same way that certain physical properties follow from the nature of H₂O.

III. THE SK THESIS AND THE INCARNATION

I believe that the SK thesis is attractive for the reasons that have already surfaced; it allows us to think of divinity as very much like a natural-kind term; and so the semantics of 'God' and 'humanity' are structurally very close and that is as it should be. However, it seems to me that the Christian has a particularly strong motivation for accepting the supernatural kinds view. For it allows one to understand the doctrine of the Incarnation in a very natural and, it would seem, relatively trouble-free way. Let me explain.

According to traditional understanding of God and humanity, the Christian claim that 'GOD became man' can appear very puzzling if not downright contradictory. For it seems to engender various logical difficulties; such problems can be generated as follows: anything that is human must exemplify property *P*; thus, since Jesus Christ is human, He exemplifies property *P*. So if He is identical to GOD the Son, then according to Leibniz's Law, the latter must exemplify *P* too; but necessarily, no divine being can exemplify *P*, so the identity claim must be false. For the property-term-placeholder *P*, one can substitute 'being limited in knowledge', 'being limited in power', 'being morally corruptible', 'existing contingently', etc. Generally, the problem is that it is thought to be a necessary truth that humans are such that they are limited in various ways, and God is such that the divine nature is unlimited in virtually every way; so any being who is both God and man would have to be both limited and unlimited with respect to many attributes (e.g. knowledge, power, and goodness). And that is, of course, impossible.

Recently, Thomas Morris has done a great deal to dissolve this apparent paradox. Morris has argued that there is no compelling reason to think that being limited in such attributes as knowledge, power, and goodness is an essential feature of humanity.⁶ Hence most of the Leibniz's Law problems described above are solved because one will not attribute to Christ the limitation properties that might initially have been thought to be essential for His being human. Now it is not my purpose here to explicate the details of Morris's apologetics. What I want to do instead is look at one of the problems that Morris's manoeuvre does not resolve and see how the claim that divinity is a supernatural kind can help the philosophical theologian who is interested in preserving Christological orthodoxy.

⁶ Morris, *The Logic of God Incarnate*, particularly Chapter Three. Richard Swinburne has recently taken this same position in 'Could God Become Man?' in Godfrey Vesey, ed., *The Philosophy in Christianity* (Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 53-70.

The recalcitrant problem concerns the attribute of omniscience. Now the manoeuvre that Morris makes does take away the standard Leibniz's Law problem; for the orthodox theologian can maintain that it is not essential for humanity that one be limited in knowledge and so one is free to attribute omniscience to Christ without generating inconsistency. However, the orthodox theologian will certainly want her Christology to concur with the scriptural account of the life of Jesus; and this causes difficulties for one who would ascribe omniscience to Christ during His earthly ministry. For Christ Himself claimed ignorance with respect to the exact time of the Last Judgement; He said that the Father alone knew this. So the orthodox Christologist who claims that Christ has to be omniscient in order to be God must explain just how it can be that an omniscient being can fail to know a proposition.

I want to explore briefly two recent attempts to deal with this dilemma. The first will be Morris's solution and the second is offered by Ronald Feenstra in his paper 'Reconsidering Kenotic Christology'.⁷ After looking at the way Morris and Feenstra try to resolve this difficulty, I will explain how one who adopts the SK thesis can handle it. I believe that this comparison will increase the attractiveness of this latter position.

Morris attempts to square the Gospel accounts of Christ with the traditional divine attribute of omniscience by postulating two minds in Christ: one human and one divine. The human mind is very limited in what it knows and will be very much like the mind of a standard human being in first-century Palestine. However, Christ is also said to have an omniscient divine mind, one most unlike that of any human. In taking on human nature, Christ takes on a human mind and during his time on earth limits himself almost exclusively to its contents. However, Christ's divine mind, being omniscient, has complete access to all of the states of the human mind, although the human mind has no access (of its own accord) to the divine mind. While from time to time, the divine mind will reveal things to the human mind, the accessing relationship between the two is asymmetric.

Given this 'two-minds' view of Christ, it is easy to see the nature of Morris's solution to the omniscience problem. With respect to His divine mind, Christ is omniscient; with respect to His human mind He is not. But since His divine mind does include knowledge of all true propositions, His omniscience remains intact.

Just as it is not my purpose to give a detailed account of Morris's apologetic, so I shall not offer any general evaluation of the adequacy or inadequacy of the two-minds view. However, let me point out some of its potential problems, beginning with one that Morris himself discusses. The first difficulty, then, is that it is not at all clear that a single person can have two minds. While cases of split personalities and commissurotomy patients might seem to be actual examples of single persons with two minds, this interpret-

⁷ In Feenstra and Plantinga, *op cit.* pp. 128–52.

ation of these cases is hardly forced upon one. A second problem, pointed out by Eleonore Stump in her review of Morris's book,⁸ is that the two-minds view does not succeed in defeating the charge of the incoherence of the doctrine of the Incarnation since it will be true of Christ that he both knew and did not know the date of the Last Judgement. Since there is a single subject of predication, it does little good to claim that Christ was omniscient with respect to his divine nature and not omniscient with respect to his human nature. Now I do not mean to suggest that these are necessarily insurmountable problems; however, they are troubling enough to make one less than completely satisfied with the two-minds view.

I turn now to the suggestion of Ronald Feenstra. Feenstra opts for what is known as a 'Kenotic' Christology. As I understand them, such Christologies are distinguished by the emphasis that they place on the biblical notion of the Christ's self-emptying; rather than seeing the Incarnation as God the Son's taking on, or adding something (namely, a human nature), they see it as His giving up His exalted status. Such theologies naturally view the Incarnate Christ as not being omniscient since this is a divine attribute of which Christ emptied Himself. The problem, of course, is to square this with the claim that Christ was God; for if omniscience is kind-essential to divinity, then in emptying Himself of this divine attribute, Christ emptied himself of divinity and hence He is not 'fully God'.

Feenstra's way of dealing with this problem is to distinguish between omniscience *simpliciter* and a slightly different attribute that God Incarnate can satisfy and then to claim that it is this latter attribute that is really essential for divinity.⁹ What is this other attribute? It is the property of being omniscient-unless-freely-and-temporarily-choosing-to-be-otherwise. And since Christian theology insists that God the Son freely and temporarily took on our limitations, Christ does have this property and hence is divine.

The obvious problem with this proposal is that it is an absolutely paradigm case of an *ad hoc* adjustment. To amend a kind-essential attribute of divinity in an unnatural way for the sole purpose of avoiding an objection is a very unattractive solution to any theological difficulty. Of course, this is not a devastating difficulty; one might even claim, as I think Feenstra would, that a Christian theologian ought to expect to have her thinking about God formed and, if needed, changed by reflecting on the Incarnation. Nevertheless, the specific and detailed alteration of the doctrine of the omniscience of God that Feenstra suggests has the feel of a desperate, *ad hoc* manoeuvre to make the doctrine of the Incarnation coherent.

In contrast to these positions, the friend of the SK thesis has a solution that would seem relatively unproblematic. And in many ways it has close affinities

⁸ *Faith and Philosophy*, vi 2 (April, 1989), 218–23.

⁹ It should be noted, as Feenstra does, that Morris is the originator of this suggestion, which, as we shall see, he eventually rejects.

with the Kenotic Christology of Feenstra; what it lacks, however, is its *ad hoc* character. To begin to see how the SK thesis can be helpful, let us recall a distinction that was made earlier, i.e. that between secondary-essential and *ceteris paribus* properties. Above, I said that a natural way to understand the relation of the properties that are in fact kind-essential for divinity and the omni-properties, is to think of the latter as necessarily derivative on the former, and hence as secondary-essential. That would preserve the modal status of such statements as 'God is good' and 'God is omnipotent'.¹⁰

However, is there any compelling reason to think that all of the traditional divine attributes must be secondary-essential rather than simply *ceteris paribus*? That is, could some of the traditional omni-properties be such that a being who is divine would naturally or standardly have them, but which are not even secondary-essential to divinity? I do not see why not. In fact, one might suppose that, properly construed, the attribute of omniscience would be quite plausibly thought to be a *ceteris paribus* property of the divine essence. But before we can see this we need to take a quick excursion into the attribute of omniscience.

According to many philosophers, a being *S* is omniscient iff for every true proposition *P*, *S* knows that *P*. To be omniscient is just to know everything there is to know. If it should turn out that propositions about the future acts of free agents lack a truth value, *S* could still be omniscient. Despite their initial attractiveness, however, such analyses are inadequate. The reason for this is made clear in Charles Taliaferro's paper 'Divine Cognitive Power'.¹¹ Taliaferro asks us to consider two agents, Christopher and Dennis. Christopher has immediate, incorrigible and infallible knowledge of every actual state of affairs; the truth of propositions about those states of affairs just automatically and infallibly registers with him. Hence Christopher is omniscient. Now Christopher tells Dennis everything that he knows, which is no mean task. So since Christopher is omniscient and everything that Christopher knows, Dennis knows, Dennis is omniscient too according to the traditional definition. They both know every true proposition. However, asks Taliaferro, isn't it clear that Christopher is epistemically superior to Dennis? But this should be puzzling since omniscience is supposed to be the very best of epistemic superlatives. Taliaferro then suggests that what is really fundamental to omniscience is 'unsurpassable cognitive power'. To have unsurpassable cognitive power is to have the ability to have unmediated knowledge that *p* for any true proposition *p*. Christopher has this trait, but Dennis lacks it since he depends on Christopher for all of his information. So Dennis, although he knows all true propositions, is not omniscient. Taliaferro grants that such knowledge is necessary for omniscience, but it is not sufficient. In

¹⁰ While such sentences can still be seen as necessarily true, they will not express *de dicto* necessities. More on this below in my reply to objection 4.

¹¹ Charles Taliaferro, 'Divine Cognitive Power', *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion*, xviii (1985), 133-40.

order to be the best of possible knowers one must possess unsurpassable cognitive power.

As we shall see presently, Taliaferro's analysis is very congenial to the SK thesis. It is also extremely compelling. For knowing all true propositions cannot be what is at the bottom of the attribute of omniscience; surely there is something in virtue of which such knowledge is had and it is this that is closer to the essence of divinity. And unsurpassable cognitive power is just such an attribute.

If all of this is right, we are at last in a position to see how to reconcile what is claimed about Christ's ignorance of certain propositions in the New Testament with the claim that Christ was God the Son. The problem has looked thorny indeed. For, as discussed earlier, if one claims that Christ was God, and one thinks that all of the omni-properties are kind-essential for divinity, then one must claim that Christ was omniscient. But if one is to remain true to the Scriptures, one can not portray Christ as omniscient. So we seem to have an embarrassing dilemma: either claim Christ's divinity and disregard the witness of the Gospels or accept what appears to be a clear scriptural teaching and deny an essential attribute of divinity to Christ and hence deny the credal assertion that He was 'fully God'. Now the SK solution is as follows: what makes a being divine is not His exemplifying the omni-properties; what makes a being divine is His being a certain kind of substance which typically exemplifies such properties. Now many of these omni-properties are secondary-essential and so any being who is divine will have them, and have them essentially. However, the friend of the SK thesis claims, while unsurpassable cognitive power might be secondary-essential, the Christian is very much within her rights in claiming that the full exercise of that power is not, but is rather only a *ceteris paribus* property of divinity. For just as God restrains His causal power to give us free will, so He restrains his cognitive power in order to take on our condition. It seems that we have here the makings of a significant variety of Kenotic Christology; for it allows us to make sense of Christ's emptying Himself of many divine (*ceteris paribus*) attributes while maintaining his divinity, since the essence of that supernatural kind is the substance from which those properties arise.

IV. OBJECTIONS AND REPLIES

It seems to me that the SK thesis is likely to be met with a whole range of objections. Before concluding, I would like to discuss some objections; for while they are undoubtedly worthy of discussion, they do not pose any insurmountable problems for this view of divinity.

Objection 1: The reference-fixing problem. Natural-kind terms have the meaning that they do in virtue of our having causal relations with the things that such terms denote. However, it isn't plausible to think that the term 'God'

can get its meaning that way because we do not even know that such a being exists. But, of course, we do know that there is such a thing as water and tigers; so there is an important disanalogy here between the way that natural-kind terms get their meaning (or the way that their reference gets fixed) and the way that 'God' gets its meaning.

Reply. My response to this is, first, to distinguish between there being knowledge of X and there being general agreement that X ; I do not see that the first requires the second. So while I am willing to grant that it is highly controversial that God exists, I am not willing to grant that there is no religious knowledge. Now does the fact that people disagree about the existence of God provide solid reason for thinking that the term 'God' did not have its reference fixed in much the same way that natural-kind terms do, i.e. by causal contact with an instantiation of the essence? It is extremely hard to see how any such claim follows. And the Christian will have a story to tell that fits in rather nicely with a causal account of the fixing of the reference of 'God'. Any Christian who thinks that the Old Testament is even partially historically correct, will think that the various founders of the Jewish faith had veridical experience of God. Way back in history somewhere, say with Adam and Eve or whoever had the first experience of God, the object of this experience was dubbed the Hebrew equivalent of 'God'. And while the believed characteristics of God seem to have changed a good deal from, say the time of the writing of Genesis to the time of the Scholastics, nevertheless the referent was the same since the way that Anselm, Aquinas and others used 'Deus' was causally connected in the right way with the way the corresponding term was used by the writer(s) of the Pentateuch.

Now of course, none of this is a proof that the reference of 'God' gets fixed in the way that natural kind terms do. All that I have done is argued that if what Christians believe about God and the way that He has revealed Himself in history is right, then the claim that the word 'God' (and its Hebrew, Greek, and Latin cousins) is used to denote the object of religious experience in much the same way that the word 'water' is used to denote an object of perceptual experience is very plausible indeed.

Objection 2: The God-as-psychological-process objection. There are, however, other worries associated with this causal element of the SK thesis. Here is one: The following is a (necessarily) true statement

[T]: If there is no being who has all or most of the *omni-property* or at least something approximating them, then there is no God.

But suppose that there is indeed no being with such attributes and that what causes religious experience is some psychological mechanism which functions to give us peace of mind. So what one experiences when one has an 'experience of God' is simply the workings of a psychological mechanism. Then, according to the SK thesis, that process is God. (Because on the causal theory of reference that this account presumes, the extension of 'God' is just what-

ever has the nature of the cause of the initial religious experience; so if all religious experiences are caused by some psychological process then 'God' just refers to such a process.) But this is, of course, absurd, in part at least, because it violates [T]. Of course it also violates even more certain principles like

[T*]: Nothing that is the product of a human psychological process is God.

Therefore, the SK thesis is wrong.

Reply. This is a serious objection and one that I do not know that I can respond to adequately. However, it is important to note that this problem is not merely a difficulty for this view about supernatural kinds, but is a general problem for the Kripke/Putnam theory of natural-kind terms. For consider the following case, which I borrow from Peter Unger.¹² Suppose that all of the things that we have always called 'cats' are really inanimate robots placed on our planet by Martians. This fact, together with the Putnam/Kripke thesis about natural-kind terms, implies that cats are really inanimate objects. But surely, it might be claimed, the proper response were we to learn this startling feline fact is that there just are not any cats, but only cat-appearing robots.

So this objection to the supernatural-kinds view of divinity is really an objection to all accounts of natural-kind terms of the Kripke/Putnam sort. One way of avoiding this result is to adopt the suggestion that Nicholas Wolterstorff makes in his article, 'Are Concept-Users World-Makers?' Wolterstorff notes that Putnam need not draw the distinction between cluster-concept terms (e.g. 'bachelor') and natural kind terms in the very stark way that he does. Wolterstorff suggests

Perhaps the condition for our application of the word 'tiger' to something is that it be of the same nature as the paradigm examples of the word's application—*provided that* that nature be an animal nature. This then would be a mixed case.¹³

So the idea here is to amend the Putnam/Kripke line so that instead of a kind term like 'tiger' meaning 'whatever has the nature of *that*', we instead say that it means 'the *animal* that has the nature of *that*'; so if it should turn out that it is not an animal at all, the term just does not refer. Similarly, then we could amend the SK thesis so that it claims that 'God' means 'whatever *supernatural being* that has the nature of *that*'. One might wish to add more by way of qualification than 'supernatural being'. For instance, it might be that nothing that was not the creator of the universe could possibly fall under the extension of 'God'. It is not my intention to take a stand on the particulars of this view. It is enough to have shown that (i) this objection is primarily an objection to indexical theories of kind terms generally and (ii)

¹² Peter Unger, *Philosophical Relativity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), pp. 84ff.

¹³ Nicholas Wolterstorff, 'Are Concept-Users World Makers?', in James E. Tomberlin, ed., *Philosophical Perspectives, 1: Metaphysics, 1987* (Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview Pub. Co., 1987), p. 248.

there appears to be room to manoeuvre that will save both our intuitions about bizarre counterfactual situations and the essence of the indexical theory.

Objection 3: The mystery objection. It might reasonably be thought that were one to adopt the position that I am suggesting, one ought thereby to stop doing philosophical theology. For how could we ever comprehend the divine essence? And if we are to take the analogy with natural kinds in the deadly serious way that I have been understanding it, the only way that we could know the properties that constitute the supernatural kind of deity is by knowing about the essence of God. And that is something we are not ever likely to know. So thinking that this suggestion is right is akin to thinking that there really is not much point to philosophical theology as it is typically practised because we cannot learn from it what we were supposed to, namely, the nature of divinity.

My response to this is two-fold. First, I completely agree that on this view the essence of God is going to turn out to be unknowable. But far from being a problem, that seems exactly right to me. One should here recall the passage in Exodus, where God is said to have told Moses: ‘My face you cannot see, for no mortal may see me and live’ (Exodus 33:20). However, I do not think that all of this entails that philosophical theology is not a worthwhile enterprise. This conclusion would follow, however, if the only way of deriving information about divinity was by the analysis of the supernatural-kind term ‘God’ and scientific research. And with more standard terms, the only way that we can come to have information about them and what they denote is by examining the semantic content on the one hand, and, for natural-kind terms, doing scientific or empirical research on the other. A Lockean would think that we can learn about the nature of water by giving an analysis of the notion. However, the Putnam/Kripke thesis suggests that to find out about the extension of water, we have to do scientific research. Now, this objection to the supernatural kinds thesis can be seen to be making this point: if you understand by ‘God’ a definite description then one can look into that description and do philosophical theology by examining the results of the semantic investigation. However, the supernatural kinds thesis rejects this understanding of divinity, and so, according to it, you cannot get at the essence of divinity by looking at a concept or the meaning of a term. But with respect to natural-kind terms, you come to find out their extensions by doing empirical, scientific research into the natures of the objects they denote. But it has already been admitted that we will never know the divine essence, and this seems right since we can not do science on God. So since the two standard ways of finding out the natures of such terms is ruled out on the supernatural kind terms thesis, there just is not anything left to do.

This is an interesting objection, and since I believe that philosophical theology is a good and profitable enterprise, I had better have something to

say by way of rebuttal. And I do. While it is true that there is a significant disanalogy here between the supernatural kind of divinity and natural kinds, it turns out to be just the sort of divergence that one would expect given the difference in the natures of the two things. That is, one should not expect scientific methodology to reveal much about God since, *inter alia*, He is an immaterial person. But while this takes away one avenue of knowledge, it opens up another. For God has the ability to reveal himself in a variety of ways that physical objects can not. So it seems to me that we can and should continue to do philosophical theology so long as we believe that God has revealed Himself, thereby giving us something to talk about. And of course that is precisely what Christians do believe. It might well be argued, for example, that the best way to think of God as He is revealed in the Scriptures is as an omniscient, omnipotent, eternal Spirit. Furthermore, one might believe that God has not been absent in all post-biblical theology and that at least the essential creeds of the Church and core of Christian belief are right. This provides us with all that we need to carry on with traditional philosophical theology.

Objection 4: The supernatural-kinds view is unorthodox. One might think that the position under discussion is too radical or extreme to be of much good to orthodox Christian philosophers. And this might seem to be a particularly important objection since I have suggested that thinking of divinity along these lines can be very useful in preserving both the two-natures view of Christ and the accuracy of the biblical record of the life of Christ.

Reply. I do not think that this view is unorthodox in any religiously significant way. For example, it does nothing to suggest that there is a falsehood lurking in the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, or the confessions of the Reformation. And this is the sort of orthodoxy with which to be concerned. Now, if the objection is that it is unorthodox from the perspective of contemporary philosophical theology, well, that is much less worrisome. However, while I will concede that it might be in certain respects philosophically unorthodox, it is worth seeing that it is hardly a radical departure from the mainline. For example, it is generally held that the following statements are true:

[1] Necessarily, God is good.

[2] Necessarily, God is omnipotent.

[3] Necessarily, God is the creator of everything other than His nature.

Now if [1]–[3] are read as analytic *de dicto* necessary truths, as they frequently are in contemporary philosophical theology, the friend of the SK thesis is committed to denying them.¹⁴ For, on the view that I am suggesting, very little gets packed into the definition or intension of 'God'. However, that does not prevent *de re* readings of [1]–[3] from being true. And it is very

¹⁴ If propositions [1]–[3] are read as synthetic *de dicto* necessities, the SK advocate has no reason to deny them. I am indebted to Jim Taylor for demanding that I recognize this point.

important to note here that there are two different *de re* readings of each of [1]–[3] and my position is consistent with any or all of them being true. Let me explain.

Typically, philosophers of religion have recognized two interpretations of [1]–[3]. First, such sentences can be thought to express analytic *de dicto* necessities, which is to say, e.g. ‘It is an analytic truth that “God is good”.’ [1] in effect says that in any possible world, if there is a being who exists there who is God, then that being is good. The ground of this truth is not to be found in the individual essence of God, rather it is grounded in the nature of the concept *God*. The other standard interpretation of [1]–[3] is that they express *de re* necessities. Thus, [1] says that the individual who is God has goodness as an essential property, or slightly differently, at every world at which the being who is God at the actual world exists, He is good. Now the SK thesis commits one to denying the truth of [1]–[3] on the *de dicto* reading. However, it does nothing to prevent one from accepting a *de re* reading of [1]–[3], since such readings have to do with the Divine Being’s individual essence and the SK thesis is a thesis about the kind-essence that that individual exemplifies.

However, if the supernatural kinds thesis is right, there is a third way of understanding [1]–[3] that is also a *de re* reading, but in which ‘God’ is understood not as the name of an individual, but as designating a supernatural kind. On this understanding, [1], for example, says that because of the nature of the kind-essence of deity, any being who is divine is good. Now I have argued that properties like goodness and omnipotence seem to be unlikely candidates for a supernatural-kind essence, since there will be more ‘ground level’ facts in virtue of which such properties apply. However, as long as such properties are what I have called ‘secondary-essential’, the *de re* readings of [1]–[3] and the like will be true. So even though the supernatural-kinds theorist is prevented from accepting the *de dicto* rendering of these sentences, she still has open to her two different *de re* understandings, one of which pertains to the individual who is God and one of which pertains to what it is to be God. And this second *de re* reading seems to capture what is important about the *de dicto* interpretation; that is, it specifies conditions that must be met for any individual to be divine. So it seems to me that the SK thesis is consistent with the spirit of the modal claims expressed by [1]–[3].

Objection 5: The supernatural-kinds view is anti-anseimian (the south bend objection). A current and apparently fruitful trend in philosophical theology involves thinking of God as the Anselmian Perfect Being, or the Being than which none greater can be conceived. According to this view, we can determine, by a priori reflection, the nature of the divine attributes. But if this is right, then reflection on the concept of God can tell us much more about the nature of God than the SK thesis would allow. Indeed, in the first

of the passages that I quoted from Thomas Morris, he remarked that this is one of the important disanalogies between natural kinds and the divine kind. These are Morris's words:

in most cases [of natural kinds], few nontrivial kind-essential properties are known to characterize particular kinds a priori. In this respect divinity seems to differ quite a bit from standard natural kinds. For the epistemic status of many, if not all, of the known attributes essential to deity can be argued to be known to be such a priori. To this extent, 'divinity' is like a constructed concept word.

Now the supernatural-kind view that I have been developing does not recognize such a disanalogy. And to that extent it is anti-Anselmian.

Reply. Guilty as charged. There is a significant sense in which this view is anti-Anselmian; the supernatural-kinds perspective cannot allow that the divine attributes get packed into the concept of God. However, there are two important points that tend to minimize this consequence.

First, we should be careful to distinguish two sorts of a priori knowledge of the divine attributes, since my position requires rejecting only one of them. The first category is what we might call 'conceptual a priori knowledge'. Knowing that a bachelor is an unmarried man or that a triangle is a three-angled figure are instances of this sort of knowledge. If the concept of God is that of the greatest possible being, and if that concept contains the concept of that being's having omnipotence, then it is what I am calling conceptual a priori knowledge. To be distinguished from this innate, non-conceptual knowledge. This sort of knowledge is perhaps the purest form of a priori knowledge that there is, since it is had temporally, and not merely logically, prior to experience.

Now I take it that the idea that we have an innate knowledge of God is clearly a biblical one. So it would be a very bad consequence of the SK thesis if it forced one to deny this. Happily, it has no such consequence. The supernatural-kinds theorist can grant that we know a priori that, say, 'God is good' but maintain that such knowledge is not conceptual, but merely innate. So there might be a fair bit of theology that one can do a priori and this does make investigation into the divine kind-essence different from the science of standard natural kind essences. However, notice that this difference has nothing to do with the semantics of the terms or the way that such terms get their meaning. Rather the difference is just that God has chosen to plant in humans a certain amount of knowledge about Himself and He has not chosen to do that about, e.g. water.

The second bone to throw the Anselmian is that there is nothing in the SK thesis that indicates that the individual who is God is not the being than which none greater can be conceived. So one can claim that GOD is the greatest possible being as long as one does not misread this as a *de dicto* necessity. Furthermore, one might also insist that the divine kind-essence is the greatest possible essence. Thus,

[4] God is the greatest possible being
can be seen to express a *de re* necessity about the divine kind.

It must be admitted, however, that there is one important disagreement between the traditional Anselmian and the SK advocate. The former thinks that significant theology can be done simply by reflecting on the concept of God and unpacking its contents. The SK advocate, while perhaps agreeing that some of our knowledge of GOD is innate, will tend not to think of her job as conceptual analysis, but rather as explicating what has been revealed about the nature of GOD. To put the point rather differently, the Anselmian thinks that a good deal of theology can be done from the top down; that is, that the notion of the being than which none greater can be conceived is a significant constraint on our thinking about GOD and the kind-essence of divinity. The SK thesis, however, suggests that our concept of God can place virtually no constraints on our theology, since the concept has very little intensional content. Thus, theology in general, and Christology in particular, will be seen as 'bottom up' enterprises; we must look at the data of revelation in order to know about GOD.

Even so, the theology of the Anselmian and the supernatural-kinds theorist need not be that far apart. There is no good reason why the God of the philosophers can not be identical to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.¹⁵

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¹⁵ I have benefited from conversations on these issues with Jim Taylor, Richard Lee and William Alston, and from electronic 'conversations' with Scott Sturgeon and Dean Zimmerman.