Chalcedonian reason and the demon of closure

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Abstract

In this essay I strive to exorcize an epistemological demon, the demon of closure. The demon has long haunted theology to devastating effect. It makes chimeric concerns appear urgent, encourages false trajectories of inquiry, fosters unnecessary fears, propagates intolerance, and instigates violence. I begin with Charles Taylor's exposure of the demon in the context of philosophy's free will/determinism debate. Second, I sketch the demon's haunting of the patristic trinitarian and christological controversies, and its recent haunting of theology vis-à-vis the problem of evil. Third, I delineate and champion what I call 'Chalcedonian reason' (Taylor calls it 'revised transcendental reasoning'). Chalcedonian reason emerges in the wake of the exorcism of the demon of closure (and involves significant revision of modern ideas about rationality). I argue that Chalcedonian reason is as old as Job, emerges amazingly triumphant, if unrecognized, in the patristic period, fosters humility and openness to the Spirit, and is wonderfully consonant with Christian theology and spirituality.

My prey in this essay is elusive. It is not so much an articulated principle as a haunting of reason. It associates reason and closure. It portrays – *needs* – knowledge as something that we, after great effort, finally, clearly, *wholly* grasp, understand, comprehend. Immanuel Levinas, describing it as a sort of 'gripping', traces its lineage to Aristotle's metaphysics.[1] Charles Taylor identifies it as reason's background urge to homogenize or converge. Within multiple areas of inquiry, but perhaps most devastatingly within theology, it makes chimeric concerns appear urgent, encourages false trajectories of inquiry, fosters unnecessary fears, propagates intolerance, and instigates violence – all without quite itself appearing. I call it the demon of closure.

The demon of closure instills in us the conviction that rationality entails extant conceptual coherence. It is, in fact, an irrational extension of an essential principle of reason, the principle of non-contradiction. By hugging tightly to non-contradiction, the demon of closure has long portrayed itself as an obvious aspect of Western rationality. 'After all', it asks innocently, 'I'm

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[1] Emmanuel Levinas, 'Ethics as First Philosophy', *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Sean Hand (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p. 76.

only asking that all your ideas be *coherent*. What in the world could be more reasonable than that?' In modernity, the demon of closure worked intimately with its less subtle sibling, the demon of certainty. The demon of certainty is largely exorcized. But not – despite the efforts of Levinas and Taylor, among others – the demon of closure. In this essay, I strive clearly to unveil the demon of closure so that, finally, it too might be exorcized.

I begin with Charles Taylor's critical exposure of the demon of closure in the context of modern philosophy's free will/determinism debate. Second, I sketch the demon's haunting of the patristic trinitarian and christological controversies, and its recent haunting of theology vis-à-vis the problem of evil. Third, I roughly delineate and champion what I call 'Chalcedonian reason' (Taylor calls it 'revised transcendental reasoning'), which emerges in the wake of the exorcism of the demons of certainty and closure.[2] Chalcedonian reason is as old as Job, emerges amazingly triumphant, if unrecognized, in the patristic period, fosters humility and openness to the Spirit, and is wonderfully consonant with Christian theology and spirituality.

1. Charles Taylor's exorcism of the demon of closure

In his 1971 essay 'How is Mechanism Conceivable?', Taylor illustrates the conceptual promise of overcoming the demon of closure's irrational demands when he tackles the 'antinomy of mechanism' – that is, the antinomy between actions and events (i.e., free will/determinism). The antinomy is familiar. The mechanistic causal explanations typical of modern science leave no conceptual space for agential ascriptions. There are no freely chosen *actions*, only *events* happening along a causally deterministic/random continuum.[3] This is significant, for exclusive appeal to mechanism means that all our intentions and actions are necessary products of causal streams which antedate us. We do not originate or influence our own 'actions'. Thus is denied the reality of, among other things, free choice, creativity (in contrast to novelty), and moral responsibility. Given the success of mechanistic science, it can seem reasonable to expect the eventual triumph of mechanism. 'After all', asks Taylor, 'we have not privileged the ordinary teleological view of inanimate object behaviour which earlier attempts at physics enshrined. Why should we be more tender with animate behaviour?'[4]

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[2] Detailed defense of Chalcedonian reason is impossible here, but its broad outline and promise should emerge clearly.
[3] Note that randomness no more funds free will than does determinism.
[4] Charles Taylor, 'How is Mechanism Conceivable?', *Human Agency and Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 169. Also critical to my argument

Taylor's audacious and seemingly non-philosophical response is that the wholly mechanistic account is '*just too preposterous to be believed*'.[5] But while he adamantly refuses to accept the ultimate triumph of mechanism, neither will he baptize Cartesian dualism or any occasionalist doctrine to resolve the antinomy. Nor will he reject mechanism. Indeed, Taylor has no counter-suggestion regarding resolution of the antinomy. Nor does he legitimate or even acknowledge any urgent need to provide one. And with precisely that lack of concern, Taylor illustrates the overcoming of the homogenizing, converging spirit that has long haunted epistemology – he has exorcized the demon of closure.

Taylor points out that there is no *a priori* way to invalidate either mechanistic or agentival understandings. Moreover, both vocabularies are *indispensable* to our richest and most complete articulations about ourselves and our world. At present, we can no more make sense of our lives if we reject the mechanistic vocabularies of the natural sciences than if we reject the agentival vocabularies of the humanities. Both vocabularies are presently indispensable to understanding. So where does Taylor stand? Well, since Taylor realizes we cannot dismiss either mechanistic or agentival vocabularies, and since neither vocabulary can fulfill all the needs met by the other, he fully embraces *both* of these mutually exclusive (i.e., incommensurable) vocabularies.[6]

He cannot, of course, embrace either as a *final* or *absolute* vocabulary, and so he remains open to further developments, to creative modifications in our understanding which might mitigate the tensions. At this point, however, he has no such modifications to suggest, nor can he dismiss either vocabulary. So, adopting the most rational position imaginable, he retains both vocabularies, oscillating between them according to ordinary if *ad hoc* conventions – utilizing deterministic, event vocabularies when dealing with earthquakes or the cold in his chest, and free will, action vocabularies when evaluating a colleague's ethical culpability, or when with thanks he accepts credit for praiseworthy insights.

Standing thus, Taylor asks his title question, '*how* is mechanism conceivable?' And he speculates that it is conceivable that we will someday evolve an enriched mechanistic vocabulary which will *not* 'show . . . intentional

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is Taylor's 'The Validity of Transcendental Arguments', *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 20–33.

[5] Taylor, 'How is Mechanism Conceivable?', p. 169.

[6] Note that 'incommensurable' simply means that no common coordinate system can currently be found in relation to which one might adjudicate among vocabularies. It does not follow that we are incapable of *understanding* more than one incommensurable vocabulary.

concepts to be eliminable at a more basic level'.[7] Some future vocabulary may save the all-dominant phenomena – the major aspects of the mechanistic causal phenomena to which modern scientific theory attests, and the major aspects of the agentival purposeful phenomena to which several millenia of first person experience attest. This new vocabulary will be not quite mechanistic in the sense we understand today, and will be not quite agentival in the sense we understand today. Taylor is gesturing toward the possibility of a genuinely new vocabulary. But we do not yet know this vocabulary. So, for the present, Taylor quite reasonably stands upon incommensurable vocabularies, frankly acknowledging the lacunae and tensions, and remaining open to any promising developments.[8]

Note that Taylor is not *anti*-closure. A single vocabulary serving all the indispensable purposes now served by event and action vocabularies *may* emerge. On the other hand, such a vocabulary may simply lie beyond our (or anyone's) conceptual ken. Perhaps the two causal streams are simply and finally incommensurable. We must admit the possibility that our fullest understanding may involve the unending embrace of incommensurable vocabularies which we appeal between on an *ad hoc* basis. This means that the seemingly innocent demand that all our ideas be coherent (i.e., commensurable) is, in instances such as these, *unreasonable*.[9]

The demon of closure, however, hugging tightly to the principle of non-contradiction to camouflage itself, demands total conceptual coherence *now*. This homogenizing drive for conceptual closure compels determinists to opt for the consistency of a full-blown mechanism. It is critical to realize that *any such premature theoretical move, which seems obviously rational to those possessed by the demon of closure, is motivated not by new discovery, enhanced explanatory productivity, the clear*

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[7] Taylor, 'How is Mechanism Conceivable?', p. 179.

[8] This is why Taylor labels this 'revised transcendental reasoning'. Kant famously utilized transcendental reasoning in his critique of pure reason. Given that we can make synthetic *a priori* judgements, he asked, what must be our epistemic capacities? As is now commonly agreed, we cannot make synthetic *a priori* judgements, so Taylor proffers *revised* transcendental reasoning. Here is his transcendental question: given that a mechanistic vocabulary is indispensable and incommensurable with an agentival vocabulary, and given that the agentival vocabulary is also indispensable, *how* is mechanism conceivable?

[9] The overwhelming majority of the time, the demand for extant coherence is perfectly reasonable. But if incommensurable vocabularies are internally coherent and indispensable (as determined by a communally broad and historically deep consensus of qualified evaluators), *then* the demand for extant conceptual coherence is unreasonable. I am here gesturing toward a looser form of indispensability than does Taylor, who aims at a sort of revised apodicticity ('The Validity of Transcendental Arguments', 20–33).

conceptual dominance of any single vocabulary, or the promise of more enriching articulation, but only by the desire for closure itself.

On Taylor's account, the demon appealed to our intellectual hubris with an epistemological 'temptation . . . to a . . . self-possessing clarity', a clarity mortally threatened if we understand ourselves according to two incommensurable vocabularies.[10] It is this temptation that leads the vast majority of today's philosophers and scientists to conclude, with determinism and in stark rejection of first person experience, that popular notions of free will are chimeric. Even many determinists concede our experience of free choice and the attractiveness of the idea, but in the end they succumb to the epistemological temptation to preserve the clarity and finality of reason at all costs. Thus the totalizing impulse to conceptual closure. That is the hubris which, ironically, yields the dehumanizing, mechanistic view.

But Taylor shrugs his shoulders. Taylor's revised transcendental approach prevents any hubris regarding our current epistemic capacities from forcing us to dismiss indispensable aspects of self-understanding. We are to keep everything that's just too preposterous to throw out – which is simply a modest and utterly reasonable way of beginning with what we honestly and most confidently affirm, and of arguing realistically over the relative strength of various affirmations after the irrational demand for closure has been abandoned. We in fact daily use and presuppose the accuracy of incommensurable mechanistic (e.g. when we turn on our computer) and intentional (e.g. when we assign moral praise or blame) vocabularies. So Taylor accepts mechanistic *and* intentional vocabularies.

Taylor's post-closure temper keeps him from seeing the incommensurability itself as the problem. Taylor has exorcized the demon of closure. So he is not tempted to generate literally unbelievable and unlivable theories whose sole point is to ameliorate the incommensurability but which otherwise do nothing to resolve real doubts or real problems. Incommensurability surely points to conceptual rifts, attention to which may hold special promise for the creation of new vocabularies, but the incommensurability itself is not a problem upon which to focus, and resolving incommensurability should not in itself be a prime goal of inquiry. We rightly retain focus upon the real problems that challenge us. But we must shed the hubris inspired by the demon of closure, the hubris that demands, *now*, a single, coherent vision of the world. Someday we may attain unto a comprehensive 'mechanistic' account, but for now we should continue fully to affirm and with rigor and enthusiasm continue to develop the

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[10] Charles Taylor, 'Preface', *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. viii.

currently incommensurable vocabularies of both the natural sciences and the humanities.[11]

2. The promise of Chalcedonian reasoning for Christianity: case studies

The promise of revised transcendental reasoning (henceforth, Chalcedonian reasoning) for Christianity can be illustrated in conversation with three representative loci: the trinitarian and christological controversies, and the problem of evil.[12]

(a) The trinitarian controversy

Chalcedonian reasoning is not marginal in the patristic period. On the contrary, it defines the spirit of the reasoning which, after tremendous struggle with the demon of closure, prevailed in the trinitarian and christological controversies (albeit surreptitiously). The Council of Nicea's (325) affirmation of the *homoousious* aggravated an already bitter fight over the relation of the Father and Son which was resolved only when the Council of Constantinople (381) specified that the Father, Son, and Spirit were three *hypostases* and one *ousia*. 'A superficial glance at the polemical literature of the period', comments J. N. D. Kelly, 'leaves the impression of a battle-royal between Sabellians and Arians.'[13] These 'epithets' were indeed front and center in the debate, but, Kelly notes, with the exception of some highly visible extremists, *neither side was actually either Sabellian or Arian*. Kelly cites Socrates (c.380–450), a contemporary historian:

> The situation was exactly like a battle by night, for both parties seemed to be in the dark about the grounds on which they were hurling abuse

[11] A recent example of revised transcendental reasoning was the incommensurability involved in understanding light simultaneously in terms of waves and particles. In the face of this incommensurability, and the powerful justification for each vocabulary, scientists had no choice but to oscillate on an ad hoc basis between wave and particle vocabularies. Much to the annoyance of many scientists, theologians quickly drew comparisons to Jesus Christ being fully human and fully divine. Scientists, however, saw the incommensurability as a tremendous problem, so the analogies drawn to Jesus Christ were hardly seen as appeals which lent either intelligibility or credibility to the christological affirmation (I am told the incommensurability has now been resolved mathematically). My appropriation of Taylor will specify why the particle/wave incommensurability (resolved or no) very nicely illustrates the wisdom of revised transcendental reasoning, and why careful christological comparison is appropriate.

[12] I analyze the controversies in conversation with J. N. D. Kelly's classic, *Early Christian Doctrines* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978). In the notes I argue that Kelly, though unawares, nonetheless delineates brilliantly the thwarting of the demon of closure.

[13] Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, pp. 238–9.

at each other. Those who objected to the word *homoousios* imagined that its adherents were bringing in the doctrine of Sabellius and Montanus. So they called them blasphemers on the ground that they were undermining the personal subsistence of the Son of God. On the other hand, the protagonists of *homoousios* concluded that their opponents were introducing polytheism, and steered clear of them as importers of paganism . . . Thus, while both affirmed the personality and subsistence of the Son of God, and confessed that there was one God in three hypostases, they were somehow incapable of reaching agreement, and for this reason could not bear to lay down arms.[14]

The upshot of the contentious debate was the classic three *hypostases* and one *ousia* formula. The critical conceptual work that would thwart the demon of closure was done at the synod of Alexandria (362), which affirmed the 'three *hypostases*' and the 'one *ousia*' while disallowing anti-Sabellian and anti-Arian reciprocal attacks upon *the logical entailments* of each other's positions.

Significantly, *homoousious does* logically entail some sort of Sabellianism. And *homoiousious does* logically entail some sort of Arianism. So the combatants' respective attacks were logically valid. But Alexandria directed focus upon and upheld the central positive affirmations: upholding the Arian metaphysical concern over the Oneness and holiness of God; and upholding the Athanasian soteriological concern over the full personality and subsistence of the Son.[15] And they thwarted the demon of closure by denying both sides full-fledged logical closure. The 'three *hypostases*' was affirmed, but the polytheism it logically entails was rejected. The 'one *ousia*' was affirmed, but the compromise of the discrete integrity of the subsistence, divinity, and personality of the Son it logically entails was rejected. Father, Son, and Spirit were affirmed as three *hypostases*. The Godhead was affirmed as one *ousia*.

The formula, of course, is literally unthinkable. Not only were both sides in the debate required to abandon any claim to logical closure, but the affirmation itself requires abandonment of any claim to closure. At the beginning of the debate, *ousia* and *hypostases* meant essentially the same thing. The resolution did not pivot on any magical redefinition of those terms such that the reality of 'God, Father, Son, and Spirit, three *hypostases* and one *ousia*' could suddenly be grasped singly and whole. The confession is, in that sense, literally incoherent. It is very tempting but quite mistaken to appeal at precisely this juncture to 'mystery'.

[14] Ibid., pp. 239–40.
[15] Ibid., pp. 253–4.

'Mystery' is an important theological concept logically related to the claim that God is uniquely unique (*sui generis, totaliter aliter*). In the precise theological sense, however, it is critical to remember that to say 'God is love' is *just as mysterious* as saying 'God is three *hypostases* and one *ousia*'. Theologically, 'mystery' applies to anything predicated of God. The incoherence in the trinitarian formula, however, *afflicts the predicate itself*. To appeal to the mystery of God does not meet the objection – considered devastating by those haunted by the demon of closure – that the formula is literally incoherent (e.g., like confessing that God is a triangular round square – what could you possibly imagine you are confessing?). The objection pertains not to predication vis-à-vis God, but to the utter meaninglessness of babbling an unthinkable thought as a confession. The perceived potency of this objection results from the haunting of the demon of closure.

Chalcedonian reasoning (it could as easily be called 'Alexandrian reasoning'), without any philosophically objectionable special pleading, allows theologians to articulate a historically and theologically precise and utterly reasonable defense of the trinitarian formula. Recall the pattern of Taylor's revised transcendental reasoning. Incommensurable, extant intentional (action) and mechanistic (event) vocabularies are both indispensable. So it is completely unreasonable to allow a presumptuous and premature drive for closure to force the rejection of either. Analogously, early Christians found confession of God's oneness and holiness, and of the full divinity and discrete integrity of the personhood of the Father, of the Son, and of the Spirit, to be indispensable to full articulation of their faith. So, utterly reasonably, Constantinople rebuffed premature drives for closure and affirmed confession of all these vocabularies.

Of course, we cannot think 'one *ousia* and three *hypostases*' any more than we can think 'triangular round square' or 'event action'.[16] But just as there are significant experiential and philosophical reasons to affirm both event and action vocabularies, so there are significant experiential, theological, and liturgical reasons to affirm the vocabularies of each of the three *hypostases* and of the one *ousia*. This is not irrational, for we are not denying the principle of non-contradiction, we are simply and quite reasonably denying the demon of closure's invidious demand for *extant* conceptual closure.[17]

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[16]   So it is unsurprising, for instance, that when various Fathers in their individual writings attempted to grasp singly and whole the *hypostases/ousia* relationship they inevitably slid toward one 'heresy' or another.

[17]   Kelly affirms the formula's virtues but, subtly haunted by the demon, describes Alexandria's distinctive approach in terms that are hopelessly vague: '[Alexandria] formally recognized that what mattered was not the language used but the meaning

We should take care to remember that, since the vocabularies are currently incommensurable, one should not attempt to speak more than one at a time. To be very precise, when making the confession we should not understand ourselves to be confessing, as if thought singly and whole, 'three *hypostases and one ousia*'. That *is* literally impossible. We should understand ourselves to be confessing, *as discrete conceptual moments*, each of the three *hypostases*, and also, *as a discrete conceptual moment*, the one *ousia* (i.e. four vocabularies).[18] It is not 'triangular circle' but, in discrete conceptual moments, 'triangle' *and* 'circle' (in a case where, though they cannot be thought together, each is confessed with equal power). Just as we cannot but oscillate on an ad hoc basis between event and action vocabularies, so we cannot but oscillate on an ad hoc basis when talking about God in terms of each of the three *hypostases*, or as one *ousia* (thus avoiding an otherwise inevitable slide toward either modalism or tritheism).[19] Of course, none of this means that the trinitarian confession may not be mistaken. But those convicted of its truth need not worry that it is either incoherent or irrational.

(b) The christological controversy

Unfortunately, the revised transcendental reasoning utilized to resolve the trinitarian controversy was not explicitly identified and affirmed. Thus the bitter dynamics of the trinitarian controversy repeated themselves in the christological controversy, for the demon could still succeed in asking,

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underlying it' (p. 253). Nonetheless, Kelly's summary of Alexandria's accomplishment superbly if unwittingly illustrates the form and promise of Chalcedonian reason (see esp. pp. 253–4).

[18] This clarifies the discrete theological vocabularies implicit in the formula. First, the vocabularies of the Father, of the Son, and of the Spirit (i.e. *qua* three *hypostases*). These vocabularies have two foci: (a) the relation of each of the persons to us (economic trinity); (b) the relation of the persons to one another (immanent trinity). Note that the immanent trinity does not address God *in se*. We would not expect God *in se* to be inconsistent with the trinity we confess, but it should hardly be controversial to suggest that God *in se* may far exceed the finite experience and understanding that has generated the trinitarian formula. Second (often confused with the vocabulary of the Father or simply neglected), there is the vocabulary of God who is One (i.e. *qua* one *ousia*). Each vocabulary deserves distinct and rigorous development.

[19] Augustine wisely suggested this oscillating approach for discussion of the time/eternity relation; namely, one cannot but speak either from the perspective of God's temporality or of God's eternity (e.g. those who ask 'what was God doing in eternity before creating the world?' make a category mistake by mixing the two vocabularies, for there literally is no time in eternity [no 'before creating']). See *Confessions*, 11:10 and 11. Revised transcendental reasoning is similarly applicable to discussion of human freedom and providence or divine foreknowledge.

'Precisely how are we to grasp the idea of a being that is human and divine? – I ask only that your theology be coherent.'

Since only coherent Christologies can meet the demon's demand, the Chalcedonian formula is excluded. Consider the 'four adverbs', which summarize Chalcedon's affirmation that the divine and human natures are both found fully in Jesus Christ 'without confusion, without change, without separation, without division'. Two distinct substances simply cannot be united in such a fashion. *Necessarily* there is *either* confusion *or* division. The formula, for those demanding extant closure, is incoherent by definition (the affirmation, like 'triangular circle', literally cannot be thought – here again, appeal to mystery is misplaced).

By contrast, Kelly notes that Appolinarius offered 'in fact the most subtle and thorough-going attempt to work out a theory of Christ's Person in the fourth century, and carried tendencies long accepted in the Alexandrian school to their logical limit'.[20] Likewise, it is at junctures where Alexandrians like Athanasius, Gregory of Nazianus, Gregory of Nyssa, or Cyril, or Antiochenes like Diodore of Tarsus, Theodore of Mopsuestia, or Nestorius, were most coherent and logical in describing the precise nature of the union of the two natures that their theologies came closest to coherence – and simultaneously veered towards troubled extremes such as 'Apollonarianism' or 'Nestorianism'.[21]

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[20] Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, p. 289. Likewise, Arius's theology was more coherent than that of the Nicene Creed.

[21] Notably, Kelly shows that Nestorius was 'not a Nestorian', and that the 'two sons' or adoptionistic doctrine his opponents detected 'was a travesty of what Nestorius intended to teach' (ibid., p. 317). The root of Nestorius's troubles was his attempt to explain the human/divine relation precisely via a 'common *prosopon*'. This formulation *was* Nestorian and masked the saving inconsistencies Kelly finds to be clear in his writings. Likewise, 'nothing could have been more explicit' than that Eutyches, if 'muddle-headed', was 'no Docetist or Apollinarian'. 'The traditional picture of Eutyches, it is clear, has been formed by picking out certain of his statements and pressing them to their logical conclusion' (pp. 331, 332–3). Cyril, like Nestorius, gets into trouble when he explains the human/divine relation precisely via 'hypostatic union', but makes an enduring contribution when, eluding the demon's haunting, he accepts 'two natures' and abandons 'hypostatic union' (accepting a bare assertion of union) in the Symbol of Union because he is satisfied that affirming 'two natures' would not be understood 'to lead logically to a 'separation' of the natures' – where, logically, it certainly *does* lead (p. 323). If Kelly can see that it is obvious that the Sabellians were not Sabellian, the Arians were not Arian, Nestorius was not Nestorian, and Cyril and Eutyches were not Apollinarian, then such should have been obvious to all involved, and the self-righteous invective and violence that characterized the trinitarian and christological controversies and disgraced the gospel should have been entirely avoidable. But the spirit of the demon of closure (aligning itself with ambition

Chalcedonian Christology represents a crisp conceptual pinnacle, if unrecognized, of reasoning free from the demon of closure. The dynamics are analogous to Alexandria and Constantinople. The problematic extremes of both the Alexandrian and the Antiochene trajectories, Nestorianism and Apollinarianism, were rejected. At the same time, the central affirmations of the incommensurable Alexandrian and Antiochene trajectories, which had come to be indispensable for the richest Christian confession, practice, and liturgy, were all affirmed. The definitive brilliance of the negative formulation of the 'four adverbs' lies precisely in the refusal to provide closure *via* 'common *prosopon*', 'hypostatic union', or any surrogates. Chalcedon even properly preserves incommensurable but indispensable affirmations by oscillating ad hoc among various vocabularies (e.g. 'as regards His Godhead . . . as regards His [humanness])'.[22]

To those haunted by the demon, the formula looks utterly incoherent. In accord with Chalcedonian reasoning, however, the humble willingness to live upon multiple, strongly and reasonably attested incommensurable trajectories – affirming that which is indispensable and rejecting that which is most problematic (even if logically entailed by any single conceptual scheme) – is utterly reasonable.[23] Though perhaps in contrast to any single

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for power?) prevailed among the major players, so the church was left with a shameful history, a compromised witness, a distraction from mission, and many cautionary tales.

[22] The Chalcedonian definition suggests development of four vocabularies: in regard to the humanity ('fully human'), in regard to the divinity ('fully divine'), in regard to the human who is God ('and'), in regard to the God who is human ('and'). Each vocabulary independently, though never in isolation, deserves rigorous development – the point of which is *never* closure for closure's sake (the so-called 'christological problem' is an illusion of the demon).

[23] I owe thanks to George Hunsinger, who in *How to Read Karl Barth* identifies the 'Chalcedonian pattern' that characterizes Barth's thought ([New York: Oxford University Press, 1991], pp. 185ff.). While reading Hunsinger, I realized that my excitement over the promise of Taylor's revised transcendental reasoning was not something *new*, but a recovery of reasoning already classic in the Christian tradition. Hunsinger's excellent analysis identifies almost precisely the dynamics I am highlighting. In my opinion, he rightly identifies a key to understanding Barth (see, for instance, his penetrating application of Chalcedonian reasoning to the question of how to understand the relationship between human and divine agency). However, both Hunsinger and Barth saw the Chalcedonian pattern as justified because the subject of theological ratiocination is uniquely unique. Thus they mount a defense of the literal incoherence of their affirmations with an appeal to mystery, which facilitates the quite correct modern objection that theologians, on specious grounds, attempt to insulate themselves from basic and otherwise uncontested principles of rationality that are fundamental to modern thought. This validates the conclusion that central Christian affirmations are irrational. The mistake results from a misplaced appeal to mystery.

participant, the Council of Chalcedon found unmitigated confession of both the full humanity and the full divinity of the Son to be indispensable to full articulation of the Christian faith. Humbly, it refused to allow a presumptuous and premature drive for closure to force any compromise of this confession. Utterly reasonably, it confessed the Son to be fully human *and* fully divine (two distinct conceptual moments, each affirmed with equal strength), 'without confusion, without change' ('no' to closure via monophysitism or surrogates), and 'without separation, without division' ('no' to closure via dualism or surrogates).

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While never explicitly identified, at decisive moments in the patristic debates over trinity and Christology, Chalcedonian reasoning triumphed over the demon of closure. In harsh battles characterized by a demand for closure, advocates tended to focus upon the most problematic logical implications of their opponents' position while highlighting the most positive aspects of their own. All sides were correct regarding what was *logically entailed* by their opponents' positions. Therefore, as long as the demon of closure prevailed, compromise was impossible.

By contrast, the synod of Alexandria, the Symbol of Union, Leo's *Tome*, and the councils of Constantinople and Chalcedon implicitly exorcized the demon of closure by affirming the most positive affirmations of incommensurable positions insofar as they were indispensable to the faith, while simultaneously condemning problematic logical entailments. For those haunted by the demon of closure, the classic formulae are textbook illustrations of irrationality. 'Triangle *and* square *and* circle? Fully round *and* fully cube? Your confessions are literally incoherent,' exclaims the demon incredulously. 'What could be more irrational, *stupid* frankly, than that?' By Taylor's wholly philosophical standards – no special pleading – they are utterly rational.[24]

Barth and Hunsinger's work can easily be modified in accord with Chalcedonian reasoning in order to strengthen their otherwise extremely insightful analyses.

[24] Tragically, Kelly, still haunted by the demon, does not recognize the dynamics of Chalcedonian reasoning even as he brilliantly depicts it. Thus he can only praise Alexandria as 'a practical step of great importance' (*Early Christian Doctrines*, p. 253) and 'statesmanlike' (p. 254). He can only see Cyril's eventual decision to accept the Symbol of Union as 'practical politics' (p. 323). He feels compelled to comment that the four theses of Leo's *Tome* had not 'probed the Christological problem very deeply' (pp. 337–8). He can only conclude the Chalcedonian definition is a product of an imperial demand, one that was finally accepted '[o]nly by dint of consummate skill and diplomacy' (pp. 339–40), and one best characterized as a 'settlement' (p. 338).

(c) The 'problem of evil'

The agonizing questions provoked by experience of evil are older than Job. But it is only in the modern period that the demon of closure has lured Christians into adopting a self-destructive stance vis-à-vis evil. 'Theodicy' is the particularly modern affront which quintessentially manifests the haunting of the epistemological demons of certainty and closure. The very idea of 'theodicy' – that *we* should set about to justify *God* – displays the arrogant spirit nurtured by the demon of certainty. But it is the demon of closure that presses the dilemma home. The modern problem of evil is concisely and (many have thought) devastatingly summed up in a single question. Affecting a soft, I-can't-dodge-the-obvious tone, the demon says: 'But how can one simultaneously confess these three: (1) God's goodness, (2) God's omnipotence, and (3) the reality of evil?'

As the demon of closure is exorcized, the sense of urgency stimulated by this question dissipates utterly. Accompanying this realization is the somewhat stunning recognition that *evil is not even the subject of the modern 'problem of evil'*. The sole focus of concern lies in satisfying the demon of closure. Consider that two classic solutions to the modern 'problem of evil' are: (1) to abandon belief in God's goodness, or (2) to deny God's omnipotence.[25] Note that both 'solutions' leave evil utterly alone. The 'solutions' in no way help name, prevent, or relieve any concrete evils (reject God's goodness or power and you are still left with exactly the same evil – and now you are without hope in God as well). The 'solutions' are useless as guides to ministry, and they offer no direct spiritual or emotional relief.[26] They address only the concern raised by the demon of closure.

The third classic 'solution' is to deny the reality of evil. While the conceptual dynamics are typically obscure, this is the 'solution' I most frequently encounter among lay Christians (often with an allusion to 'all things working together for good'). Haunted by the demon of closure,

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Kelly's political analyses are all surely right. His descriptions likely exhaust the self-understanding of all involved. But I am suggesting that at Alexandria and Chalcedon the community also made a momentous and brilliant epistemological maneuver and banished the demon from their communal affirmations, if not from their individual hearts and minds. Thus the Christian can discern in the Conciliar trinitarian and christological definitions not mere pragmatic compromise, but a theologically and philosophically profound triumph of the Spirit.

[25] Henceforth, in place of 'omnipotence' I will use the theologically more appropriate confession that God's power is 'sufficient'. This shift in no way mitigates the conceptual tension between the three affirmations.

[26] It may, of course, be true either that God is not good or that God is not omnipotent, but the existence of evil does not in itself entail either conclusion.

Christians sense vaguely but potently that evil threatens their affirmation of God's sufficiency and goodness. Thus they struggle to deflect or mute the challenge. Commonly, for instance, they will suggest that many evils must have been *deserved*, and so are just. Other evils, they continue, may be teaching a valuable lesson, while others might be part of a larger plan with good ends. In these cases too, they contend, what *appears* to be evil is ultimately, and hence actually, for the good.

It may be true, of course, that *some* 'evils' really are expressions of justice, or are necessary pedagogically or as means to higher goods. But even a cursory historical survey of the vast evils perpetrated upon innocent millions to no discernible good renders any attempt to deal with evil by means of such denials morally and spiritually revolting. This third 'solution' too in no way helps to name, prevent, or relieve any concrete evils. On the contrary, it aids and abets evil. Its obfuscation inhibits the struggle against evil, and the emotional and spiritual damage wrought upon victims by its machinations cruelly heightens their suffering. Voltaire was *right* – theologically, emotionally, spiritually, and politically – to mock Leibniz and his *Theodicy*. He was *wrong* to think he had mocked, or even begun to understand, how Christians actually can stand in the face of evil.

By contrast, Chalcedonian reason facilitates our embrace of two full-blooded but incommensurable Christian confessions: on the one hand, our profound sense of the faithfulness of a good and sufficient God whose 'yes' is reality's alpha and omega; on the other, our sickening, heart-rending awareness of the unmitigated reality of evil both without and within. Given current understanding, both protest and confession must be full-blooded and uncompromised. Christians simultaneously confess with full confidence and lament with unmitigated ferocity (and, as the Psalms illustrate, such laments are rightly directed *at* God).

For those haunted by the demon of closure, 'Where were you when I laid the foundations of the world' sounds like a desperate, irrational dodge. In truth, the book of Job is an attack upon an irrational demand for immediate conceptual closure – it attacks the demon of closure. None of this necessitates an abandonment of our demand that there be some ultimate – if currently unfathomable to any but God – explanation for evil. Neither does it mean we must silence those who in frustration and agony cry out at God. Chalcedonian reasoning reasonably prevents us from abandoning any of three powerful, independently attested, and currently incommensurable Christian convictions: (1) that evil exists; (2) that God's power is sufficient to ensure the realization of all God's intentions (i.e. the standard 'God is omnipotent'); (3) that God is good.

The demon of closure, in a brilliant deception, has tricked even Christians into seeing this threefold affirmation itself as the paradigmatic 'problem of evil'. Chalcedonian reason dissipates the deception, and in its wake one realizes that the threefold affirmation actually reflects the experiential history of Judaism and Christianity. Evil, after all, preceded Jewish or Christian theology. The ancient Israelite confession of God's goodness and faithfulness came not in ignorance or denial but precisely in the face of enduring suffering and evil. Contrary to a common modern prejudice, evil did not arrive as a threat to naive faith. On the contrary, in the actual course of events faith was proclaimed out of the midst of evil (without 'theodicy').

Over the past few centuries, then, the demon of closure has successfully tricked mainstream Western theology into a fatal either/or: either justify fully the existence of evil, or admit that your faith in the ultimacy of God's goodness is irrational. Since justifying the ways of God vis-à-vis the existence of evil is evidently beyond our ken, this is a lose/lose proposition.[27] But instead of rejecting the either/or or condemning its presumption, Christian apologists made the fatal mistake of taking up the challenge, of developing 'theodicies'. Now, it is important to note that modern theological reflection upon evil and suffering has produced great insight. Work on theodicy *per se* is not the problem (though I suggest we drop the arrogant label 'theodicy'). But modern philosophers and theologians have typically seen the either/or as an immediate and significant challenge, one which rightly demands an answer, *now*, as a prerequisite to an affirmation of the reasonableness of faith. Thus the demon of closure maneuvered Christians into the rhetorically, intellectually, spiritually, pastorally and existentially impossible position of having to respond to concrete evils with a complete theoretical explanation.

Christians should respond to evil with aid, compassion, empathy, sheer presence and eventually (or, perhaps, preemptively), with testimony to the Christian hope that evil does not have the final word. When Karen screams at me over the bruised body of Jenny, her strangled child, '*Why? Why?*', I meet her with my own anguish and sympathy and love. If she presses the question, I give an honest answer: I do not know. In this real-life, heightened emotional context, my tone properly carries a threatening, to-God-directed

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[27] A form of understanding that synthesizes the three *may*, of course, emerge over the course of the centuries if we mature spiritually, or such understanding may be utterly beyond our ken. It is premature to draw either conclusion. I maintain only that we cannot currently think the three together, but that this lack does not in any significant way inhibit us in the struggle against evil, and thus that our current inability to achieve conceptual closure should not be the focus of our concern – let alone be given credit as a potential 'defeater' of the rationality of Christianity.

whiff of 'but there damn well better be some way in which it all works for good *for Jenny*'.

I am simultaneously sustained, however, by my incommensurable and enduring faith in God's goodness and power and righteousness, and I am freed by Chalcedonian reason from the suspicion that, in order to retain in all its fullness my faith in God, I must be able to understand, *now*, how to reconcile my faith with the brutal murder of Jenny. Such is not possible. I can retain my (threatening) demand for an explanation. I cannot demand comprehension *now*. But I, and hopefully Karen (though perhaps not on this day), can benefit from both the incommensurables: full-bodied, unmitigated screaming over intractable evil, *and* full-bodied, unmitigated faith in the ultimacy of God's 'yes'.

Christians are not distinguished by an inability to develop a theory that adequately accounts for evil. *No one* has such a theory. Christians are distinguished by their faith – not conclusion, inference, or knowledge – that a good God is sufficient.[28] Christian hope in the ultimacy of God's grace – not theodicy, and not denial – is what justifiably distinguishes Christians from those tragic souls who, without any such hope, bitterly face the 'tears of humanity with which the earth is soaked from its crust to its center'.[29] Christians should engage with utmost subtlety, passion, and energy the tasks of naming evil, seeking out its depths even in our own hearts and minds, minimizing its influence, and mitigating its effects. But Christians should abandon confused attempts to defend faith by answering modernity's so-called 'problem of evil'. Such serves neither God nor neighbor, but only the demon of closure.[30]

3. The contour and spirit of Chalcedonian reason

As the violence that characterized the trinitarian and christological debates illustrates, the demon of closure fosters intolerance. Given its demand for immediate and total conceptual closure, this is not surprising. Under sway of the demon, the ideal of flawless and total systems of understanding

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[28] I cannot here even begin to delineate the faith/knowledge relation in the wake of the exorcism of the demons. I hope to delineate that, along with other dimensions of Chalcedonian reason, in a larger work, in relation to which this essay is something of a promissory note.

[29] The words of Ivan Karamazov in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Signet Classic, 1999), p. 237.

[30] For an example of how one might reflect upon evil after exorcizing the demons of certainty and closure, see William Greenway, 'Charles Taylor on Affirmation, Mutilation, and Theism: A Retrospective Reading of *Sources of the Self*', *Journal of Religion* (Jan 2000), pp. 23–40.

becomes an obsession. Incommensurability is fatal. To acknowledge one makes incommensurable affirmations is *always* a major threat – it means one's understanding is incoherent. When adjudicating among various understandings of atonement, for instance, the demon of closure tempts us to suppose that for some one theory to be true all others must be false. Battle lines are clearly drawn and focus is directed upon disagreement and opponents' weaknesses.

If I am to defend substitutionary atonement, for instance, then my goal must be to establish some variety of it as a comprehensive and flawless account of atonement. It seems irrational to be both Anselmian *and* Abelardian. Not only other atonement theories, but competing varieties of substitutionary theory constitute a threat. Only one of us can be correct. It is them or me. If I can invalidate any aspect of a competing theory, I can safely dismiss it. Likewise, my own theory may collapse by virtue of a single flaw. From within this take-no-prisoners outlook, to affirm isolated strengths in an opponent's account only abets the enemy, for among competing accounts only one can be true. Such are the ideals of rationality that the demon of closure gleefully induces *opponents together to embrace as unquestioned dictates of reason.*

Obviously, this version of 'reason' dictates that opponents focus upon points of difference. Efforts to discern and sustain stark boundary lines among competing communities are ensured. In short, the devastatingly devious fruits of the demon of closure are conceptual brittleness, a constant sense of vulnerability, an unwillingness to compromise, a reflexive denial of the possibility that strong points from competing accounts may supplement weak points in one's own understanding, and an anxious desire to attack. The demon breeds anxiety, defensiveness, and hostility. Witness the trinitarian and christological battles. Witness – among Christians, Muslims, atheists, scientists, politicians, and professors of English, among many others, both liberal and conservative – fundamentalism.

Chalcedonian reason, by contrast, fosters a confident and generous spirit. Chalcedonian reason anticipates conceptual limitation and incommensurability. There is every reason to have utmost confidence on the whole in one's own most certain affirmations. Competing theories – insofar as they allow for valuable affirmations incommensurable with those of your favored theory, and insofar as they rightly isolate problematic areas in your dominant understanding – become sources of helpful, if incommensurable, insights. It is expected and reasonable that one will affirm a few highly attested, internally coherent, but incommensurable vocabularies. In such instances (e.g. mind/mechanism) *incoherence is one's most reasonable extant option.* Furthermore, areas of common affirmation will return to center stage. We will naturally understand ourselves to be by far more linked by our commonly

held conceptions than we are separated by our differences. Where the demon of closure tempts us to totalizing affirmations and negations and a divisive, antagonistic mentality, Chalcedonian reason encourages strong affirmation of our theory's strengths, and frank acknowledgement of its weaknesses – all amidst a broad community which by far shares in areas of mutual confession.[31]

Chalcedonian reason, then, facilitates not mere tolerance but *celebration* of incommensurable theories of atonement. The obvious biblical affirmations of incommensurable ideas about atonement, for instance, are not a problem to be overcome, but a gift to be celebrated. In particular social, political, or personal contexts, one theory of atonement may be especially fecund and another damaging. *This most definitely is not 'anything goes' relativism.* Some theories may be rejected utterly. Others may retain marginal status. And, as has in fact happened, a few will likely emerge ever more solidly as classics (in the Gadamarian sense).[32]

It is possible that, in time, a single theory of atonement will become ascendant. But once one has truly exorcized the demon of closure one stops *hoping* for such singularity. On the contrary, after the exorcism the possibility of conceptual closure raises the specter of theological reduction, that is, of *loss* (especially in light of the possibility that the closure might result from coerced homogenization or a lack of theological creativity). At any rate, the triumph of any single theory of atonement is definitely not itself legitimate as a primary *goal* of inquiry. Such focus serves only the demon of closure. The critical task is to continue refining a variety of theories in the face of new concrete critiques or historical circumstance. We are

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[31] For instance, Chalcedonian reason will quite automatically remember that if one is debating competing accounts of atonement then *everyone in the debate already shares an incredible array of highly specific affirmations* – for example, to name but a few, a personal God exists, God is good, God acts on our behalf, God was in some fashion incarnate in Jesus Christ. There are *lots* of people who reject *all* forms of all these affirmations (though Chalcedonian reason will remember that we still share an incredible array of highly specific ethical affirmations with many of them). The point is that while differences will not be neglected, they will be debated amidst a continual awareness of a multifarious, deeper, and abiding mutuality.

[32] A 'classic' is a work whose wisdom has been established by virtue of the judgement of generations. No 'classic' is absolutely beyond question, but the more enduring the judgement 'classic' (e.g. *The Iliad, Macbeth*), the more authority is credited to the judgement (Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Garrett Barden and John Cumming (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1988), pp. 253–8, 2nd part, II.b.ii, 'The classical example'). In the Christian community, there is also the belief that the influence of the Spirit is subtly inspiring our creation and discernment of classics (e.g. Genesis, the Gospel of John).

looking for advance in subtlety across the board. Some theories may be fully eclipsed or rejected, others may newly emerge (perhaps in response to new socio-political or judicial theory, as was the case with Anselm and with Abelard). The enduring insights of the classics can continue to be utilized to the fullest.

Of course, there is no *a priori* way to determine what will happen. There are no meta-criteria by which we can adjudicate among all possible theories. On the other hand, the multifarious but hard-gained wisdom of generations of Christians provides ample contingent but highly reliable criteria by which to adjudicate among theories reasonably and powerfully. And there is *no reason to doubt* that in fact we do marginalize the worst and embrace the best. Loss of certainty does not entail doubt. There remain ample grounds for ascribing degrees of confidence or tentativeness. Even regarding classic accounts, of course, Chalcedonian reason encourages us frankly to acknowledge both strong and weak dimensions, and to acknowledge that in the midst of distinct contexts and challenges, different accounts may appropriately be valued differently. There will be no way to draw absolute lines of demarcation – it is the demon of closure that tricks us with the utterly inane idea that in order to make any judgements one must be able to draw distinct boundary lines. Again, loss of certainty regarding boundaries in no way inhibits judgements with regard to non-borderline cases. Theories of atonement that clearly violate central affirmations (e.g. which see God as petty, vindictive or hateful) can without hesitation be rejected.

4. A reassuring reminder

Chalcedonian rationality is alien to our dominant forms of scientific, philosophical, and theological inquiry. Those haunted by the demon of closure may well feel threatened by Chalcedonian reasoning. Fortunately, the demon has not successfully haunted a nearly universal arena of rationality. Comfort may increase when we realize that Chalcedonian reason is virtually identical to ordinary esthetic reasoning. Within the realm of esthetics one certainly draws qualitative distinctions. One recognizes the genius of masters like Mozart, Shakespeare, or Dali, and one as easily categorizes rank amateurs. But these judgements are made without any definitive criteria. Furthermore, we constantly evaluate better and worse without a definition of what is best. It is impossible to adjudicate with any certainty superiority *among* artistic works of genius. 'Mozart versus Beethoven' is fine for fun but sophomoric taken seriously. We do not strive to identify *the* best work of art – indeed, the very idea of *a* best work of art (e.g. *a* best 'Lord's Supper') rightly strikes us as nonsensical. Furthermore, we easily acknowledge that evaluation of

borderline works may long remain uncertain – sometimes the judgement 'genius' emerges, or is withdrawn, only after centuries.

Moreover, we readily celebrate incommensurability among both mediums and meanings. Mozart's genius cannot be reproduced with words, nor Shakespeare's with brush strokes, nor Dali's with a symphony. This is not to deny some degree of conceptual overlap, but it is simply confused to think the essence of such distinct expressions of genius can be wholly conceptually coordinated across diverse media (e.g. understanding contributes to our experience of non-linguistic art forms, but full experience of Mozart requires one finally to relinquish words). Similarly, we do not seek to coordinate the meaning of Dali's *Last Supper* with the meaning of da Vinci's *Last Supper*, let alone with a Bach mass. We celebrate the uniqueness of Dali's and da Vinci's and Bach's masterpieces – and we hope for the creation of more, equally distinct, masterpieces.

In the realm of esthetics, then, we operate comfortably and peacefully with no certain foundations, no certain criteria for distinguishing works of genius, no definitive lines demarcating boundaries between 'banal', 'average', 'good', 'genius', no possibility of closure regarding *the* best work of art, and with incommensurability among both media and forms of understanding. On the whole, then, within the realm of esthetics we make confident judgements – decisive at the extremes ('genius' or 'utterly banal') – and live comfortably with gradients of plurality and ambiguity. We strive not for finality, but for increase, not for singularity, but for fecundity, not for conceptual narrowing, but for advance into ever more diverse and more complex vistas of beauty, love, and understanding; we strive not for closure, but for invocation of as many incommensurable vocabularies as possible in order to ever more richly contour, enhance, and articulate life.

In theology, likewise, the call to celebrate diverse doctrines of atonement is certainly not a call to celebrate *all* doctrines of atonement. As in art, there will be confirmed classics, confirmed failures, and all manner of efforts in between. We may not be able to draw distinct boundaries, but we can be confident that we know when we have wandered into territories of excellence or deficiency. Our esthetic reflection, having largely escaped the haunting of the demon of closure, closely mirrors what I am calling Chalcedonian reasoning. Contrary to modern prejudice, the arts, not the sciences, should provide the primary epistemological paradigm for theological reflection (indeed, my argument suggests the arts should provide a primary paradigm for philosophical, ethical, and scientific reflection as well).[33] All this may well

[33] A word regarding ethical judgements, which demand far more careful delineation than is here possible. As should be obvious, ethical relativism is not a consequence

frustrate those with a low tolerance for ambiguity, but in fact it accurately depicts the character of our finite and imperfect epistemic capacities.

5. Chalcedonian reason, Chalcedonian spirit

By encouraging carefully modulated judgements, maximum generosity, and a focus on areas of mutual affirmation, Chalcedonian reason fosters a Chalcedonian spirit (in contrast to the bitter spirit which, tragically, characterized so much of the trinitarian and christological controversies). Of particular significance once the demon of closure is exorcized, Chalcedonian

of Chalcedonian reason. Just as we are fully confident and unhesitating in judging da Vinci's *David* a work of genius, we are fully confident in condemning and, if necessary, jailing pedophiles. After the exorcism of the demon of certainty, we realize the impossibility of establishing objective and universal ethical truths, but equally false is the reactionary contention that *all* ethical assertions are equally unjustifiable. Also, admitting that ascertaining objectively what is true is beyond our epistemic capacities does not entail that there is no objective and universal truth, good, or evil. It is perfectly reasonable to believe that good and evil are matters of truth (for a Christian such truth would correspond to the judgment of God – and would *not*, notably, be knowledge to which we should *ever even attempt to lay claim*). Even given our finite and imperfect capacities, a host of moral platitudes (e.g. torturing children for pleasure is wrong) can still be affirmed and acted upon without hesitation, even though a host of truly controversial moral questions (e.g. regarding genetic testing and engineering) will remain unsettled for the foreseeable future.

Of course, with regard to the numerous moral quandaries we face in ethics, there are no *a priori* shortcuts. Unlike modern reason, however, which inevitably focuses attention on points of ethical difference among communities, Chalcedonian reason urges us to focus upon areas of commonality while not ignoring points of significant and currently intractable difference – significantly, there is currently considerable global ethical consensus on a host of moral platitudes (e.g. the Geneva Conventions, the Universal Declaration on Human Rights). While Chalcedonian reason does not preclude coercive – and perhaps even violent – action against communities that are acting in accord with incommensurable and what are judged to be evil values, it is far more likely to appeal to violence only in extreme circumstances due to its emphasis on humility and its native impulse to tolerate incommensurability.

Beware a common objection to Chalcedonian reasoning which typically runs like this: if you accept Chalcedonian reasoning then we can never have ethical certainty. This is akin to the student who complained to me, 'But if you don't give me an "A" I won't be able to get into a doctoral program!' Ethical certainty would be nice, but epistemic imperfection and finitude is evidently our lot (this is valid philosophically – as has become obvious in the course of exorcizing the demon of certainty – and valid theologically – following from both our finite ways of knowing and our sinfulness). Note also that ethical relativism, because it is inextricably linked to the dialectic of certainty, *is conceptually exorcized along with the demon of certainty*. We get neither objectivism nor relativism, but ethical judgements about which we can claim far more (e.g. rape is wrong) to far less (cloning zygotes is right/wrong) confidence.

reason inspires in us an intuitive celebration of plurality. We suddenly resonate with rhetorical questions such as: Is it so strange to imagine that the nature of how rightly we are to relate to God is more fully captured by incommensurable Catholic, Orthodox, Baptist, Presbyterian *and* Quaker conceptions, than by any one singly? Is it not more intuitive, in the face of four historically and theologically incommensurable Gospels, to drop talk of the synoptic *problem* (stifling the demon's chuckles) and instead to celebrate the fecundity of the plurality?[34] Is it not utterly reasonable, while not forsaking frank assessment and argument over relative strengths and weaknesses, to celebrate diverse churches, denominations, polities? Or diverse understandings of the eucharist, God, Jesus Christ, atonement, Christology, or trinity?[35]

I cannot, of course, simultaneously *be* (in a spiritual/existential sense) Quaker, Catholic, and Baptist, but there is every likelihood that God is more fully glorified by such rich but incommensurable conceptions than would be the case with any one singly. For my finite part, I can *be* Presbyterian and still celebrate and benefit from, if at something less than a full existential level, incommensurable Quaker and Catholic understandings.[36]

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[34] Recall, in an early rebuke of closure, the patristic rejection of Tatian's *Diatessaron*.

[35] Above I tried to rehabilitate the classic trinitarian and christological confessions by arguing that they preserved the best and excised the worst from the Antiochene and Alexandrian trajectories. It does not follow that these two trajectories *exhaust* valuable possibilities for trinitarian or christological reflection. In this regard, see Daniel Migliore's 'The Person and Work of Jesus Christ' for a beautiful example of Chalcedonian reasoning and of a Chalcedonian spirit (*Faith Seeking Understanding* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991], pp. 139–64).

[36] Though I cannot develop the point here, it is worth noting that Chalcedonian reason would invoke – though with some significant qualifications resulting from the difference in the scale of the incommensurability – the same dynamics that ensue among varieties of Christian theology when dealing with the relationship between religions. To put the point in the most provocative fashion, once one moves beyond certainty and, most especially, closure, one can be a fully convicted Christian apologist while granting the *possibility* that one's friend's incommensurable Buddhist beliefs, insofar as they, like yours, are an indeterminate distance from truth, are, in their current form, *equally* true (*this* is where it is critical that one remember and take very seriously the category of mystery). Of course, I can sincerely do no other than live within my present understanding. That is, I wholly believe Christianity to be far more true than Buddhism (there is no virtue in pretending otherwise), and would debate with a contemporary Buddhist accordingly – but neither of us has unmediated, privileged access to the Ultimate, nor can either of us know what might come of either internal developments or inter-faith debates in a millennium or three. Significantly, in the meanwhile, Chalcedonian reason quite automatically inclines one to attend to

For those possessed still by the demon of closure, such celebration of diversity can feel at best irrational and at worst like an abdication of any real conviction and confession. But for those filled with a Chalcedonian spirit, the blending of conviction over one's personal confessions with a humble recognition of finitude, imperfection, and ambiguity, and thus with a celebration of plurality, feels utterly natural. Nor, it is important to note, does it preclude strident or even coercive measures in response to one's most profound, widely shared, and historically deep theological or ethical convictions (see note 33). The Chalcedonian spirit is critical, yet open. A bit more precisely, it is appropriately firm regarding its most firmly supported beliefs (Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 in D minor, 'Choral', is a work of genius), dismissive of those judged patently silly (astrological charts), coercive with regard to those judged most certainly evil (pedophilia), appropriately soft regarding highly prized but non-ethical beliefs (trinitarianism – Christians rightly jail the pedophile, but not the unitarian), and generous in fostering exploration of diverse perspectives in areas of greatest puzzlement (mind/brain relation, contours of a 'final theory', ethics of genetic engineering) or mystery (eucharist, incarnation, atonement, God in se).[37]

This complex interplay of conviction and humility in our understanding accurately reflects the hard mix of surety and ambiguity in our daily lived experience, and is utterly consistent with biblical assessments of our epistemic potential. The Jewish and Christian scriptures – in accord with the holy writings of many faiths – stand in stark contrast to the hubris to which the demons of certainty and of closure tempt us: '"For as the heavens are

the vast array of values Christians share with Buddhists (e.g. regarding justice, love, humility, religious freedom, and care for the poor and for the earth).

[37] I naturally gloss the distinction between the spheres of ethics and esthetics. Consistent with the exorcism of the demons of certainty and closure, I would argue that no *a priori* line between the spheres can be drawn, that precise boundaries will always be a matter of debate, but that nonetheless with regard to the vast majority of judgements we can be confident about which are ethical (where 'ethical' means simply that we find toleration of diversity unacceptable – e.g. pedophilia), and which are esthetic (where 'esthetic' means simply that we allow or even celebrate diversity – e.g. Christianity and Buddhism, Beethoven and Liszt). Chalcedonian reason corrects an irrational, historic, and unfaithful tendency for Christians to be most coercive, even murderous, with regard to the *most mysterious* of affirmations (e.g. regarding the trinity, baptism, the eucharist) – obviously, such should be sites of maximal toleration (at these junctures we should quake, stunned at the evil wrought in the name of God by the demon of closure).

higher than the earth," says the Lord, "so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts."'[38]

In ways small and historic, the demon of closure has fostered unjustifiable enmity and violence. Its noxious influence endures. But in an age when reason itself has come under unparalleled scrutiny, the demon's subtle contours have been unveiled with unprecedented clarity. Now is the time to still our epistemological hubris, to seize this demon, to exorcize it fully from our hearts and our minds, to embrace Chalcedonian reason, and to rejoice with a Chalcedonian spirit.

[38] Isa 55:9. While many might find the version of reason I am sketching here threatening in its ambiguity, others will recognize my strong dependence upon Gadamer's hermeneutics. A standard critique of Gadamer, and in particular of his reliance upon the wisdom of historic communities to generate classics, pivots upon the inherent conservatism entailed in his affirmation of the status quo. This critique also applies to my approach. In brief, I would follow Paul Ricoeur in 'Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideology' (in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, ed. and trans. John Thompson [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988], pp. 63–100) by balancing my appeal to Gadamer with Habermas's critique – properly exorcized, as appropriated by Ricoeur, of the haunting that stimulates Habermas's desperate clinging after a metaphysics of certainty and closure. Unfortunately, at the close of this brilliant essay Ricoeur manifests the haunting of the demon of closure. He finds 'hermeneutical consciousness' (primarily an 'ontology of prior understanding') and 'critical consciousness' (primarily an 'eschatology of freedom') to be incommensurable (pp. 99–100). But whereas Chalcedonian reason would be unsurprised at this antinomy (or *aporia*), Ricoeur, possessed, feels the lurking threat of incoherence. He declares it a 'false antinomy', exclaiming that we should not react 'as if it were necessary to choose between reminiscence and hope!' (p. 100). Ricoeur, unconvincingly compromising the brilliant contrasts drawn to that point in the essay, reacts (caveats flying) by collapsing critique into tradition (that it is a tradition of liberation is no help). Chalcedonian reason facilitates clear admission that the vocabularies of hermeneutics and critical theory are incommensurable, that both must be kept in play, and that frankly acknowledging the antinomy, far from being a descent into incoherence, is *presently our most reasonable course of action*, as is the admission that we cannot but oscillate on an ad hoc basis between these two indispensable vocabularies. Ricoeur's brilliant analysis would thereby be simplified and strengthened. I would also follow Ricoeur in drawing the clear parallel within religion to the antinomy between dependence upon the wisdom of the tradition (e.g. scriptures) and openness to the emergence of the radically new and discontinuous (e.g. the prophetic, or something as unpredictable and wildly improbable as incarnation).