

Pushing the Mystery Button: The Limits of Logic and Language

Whenever the Christian tradition has sought to describe the nature of God and God's interaction with our world, it has always been with the caveat that God remains mysterious in various ways. But in what ways exactly? And, relatedly, when is it appropriate to appeal to the 'mysteries of God' in defending our own affirmations about God from possible objections?

We find a useful avenue for exploring these questions in Larry Wood's discussion of God's relationship to time. In his articles, "Does God Know the Future? Can God Be Mistaken?: A Reply to Richard Swinburne"¹ and "Reply to Alan Padgett,"² Wood defends Boethius's claim that the eternal nature of God amounts to "the whole, perfect, and simultaneous possession of endless life."³ Boethius went on to explain that God is "eternal[ly] present" in all instances of time.⁴ Wood defends Boethius from the general objection that God could not act in human history if all events in history were really 'eternally present' to him.

Indeed, Wood offers a number of *kinds* of defenses, which I wish to explore. After arguing that modern physics renders Boethius's claims entirely coherent, Wood notes that both modern physics and our claims about God may seem incoherent "from the standpoint of our common sense."⁵ Wood even warns about being "trapped by common sense"⁶ and about the "limits of deductive logic."⁷ He touches on the limitations of human language, claiming that we should not "insist that theological language must correspond to the intuitive logic of ordinary human experience."⁸ He also talks about a "larger meaning of truth," warning that we may become "confused if we are locked within a modernist notion of truth."⁹ Finally, Wood makes use of terms that seem openly ambiguous, asserting that God "embraces all space-time reference frames"; that God "synthesizes everything simultaneously"; and that God is the "unbounded power of the future."¹⁰ In response to the objection that these terms are too suggestive to help in clarifying God's relationship to time, Wood falls back on the Christian's need to employ "dialectical ways of speaking."¹¹ And we should not forget that "Christian theology has always maintained the mystery" that God created the world—with God's relationship to space-time thus remaining a subject we cannot fully capture with human concepts."¹²

¹ In *Asbury Theological Journal* 56, no. 2: 2002, 5-47.

² In *Asbury Theological Journal* 60, no. 1: 2005, 9-21.

³ Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. Richard Green (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1962), 116.

⁴ Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, ed. J. J. Buchanan (NY: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1962), 64.

⁵ Wood, "Does God Know the Future?", 28.

⁶ *Ibid*, 31.

⁷ Wood, "Reply to Padgett," 6.

⁸ *Ibid*, 12.

⁹ *Ibid*, 12.

¹⁰ Wood, "Does God Know the Future?", 30.

¹¹ Wood, "Reply to Padgett," 15.

¹² Wood, "Does God Know the Future?", 24.

Within Wood's defense of Boethius, there again seem to me to be a number of different lines of response. In what follows I shall attempt to distinguish and clarify some of the key issues at stake when we appeal to the limits of human language and logic. In the process, we shall get a better idea of when it is (and is not) appropriate to appeal to divine 'mystery' in explaining the ways of God.

I. Challenging the Laws of Logic

In interpreting Boethius's description of God's eternity, Wood defends the idea that God experiences "all different time-frames simultaneously in his eternal life."¹³ While the various events in human history stand in relation to us right now as past, present, or future, all events are present to God. Alan Padgett, however, has challenged the idea of the 'eternally present' on the grounds that it is inconsistent with the Christian claim that God acts within the developing timeline of human history.

the belief that past, present and future are real ontological differences, and the belief that all of the past, present and future are present to God in eternity, along with the belief that God acts in history: these three beliefs cannot all be true. They are logically inconsistent.¹⁴

The idea is that, if we affirm that there is a real difference between the past and the future (as there obviously is), and if we affirm that all events in history are 'present' to God, then we cannot go on to affirm that God acts *in* history. At best, God could perform acts from all eternity, with the *effects* being felt in time. For, an action within time seems to require a temporal sequence—i.e., a time when the action has not yet been performed, followed by a time when the action is initiated, followed by a time when the action is completed. Hence, it seems that God could not act within human history if God truly experiences all events in history in an "instant".¹⁵

The charge of logical inconsistency is a serious one. While a minority within the Christian tradition have wanted to insist that God is somehow 'above' the laws of logic, the majority within the tradition have affirmed that logical consistency marks all things secular and divine.¹⁶ After all, our ability to affirm *anything* depends on the assumption that the negation of what we affirm cannot *also* be the case. Admittedly, there may be some debate among logicians as to which more complex principles do and do not follow from the so-called Law of Non-Contradiction—i.e., that something cannot *be* the case and also *not be* the case at the same time and in the same way. But if we do not assume this first principle of logic, then we seemingly have no way of identifying heresy, stating the uniqueness of Christianity, or, again, affirming anything positive at all about God. The claim that Jesus singularly atoned for our sins automatically rules out the idea that

¹³ Wood, "Does God Know the Future?", 30.

¹⁴ Alan Padgett, "Is God Timeless? A Reply to Laurence Wood," *Asbury Theological Journal* 60, no. 1: 2005, 6.

¹⁵ Wood, "Does God Know the Future?", 7.

¹⁶ To allay the concern that nothing—not even logic—should be placed 'above' God such that God is 'bound by' logic, we might wish to view the laws of logic as principles we discover about the nature of God, whom the Bible describes as a God of order. The sense in which God is 'bound by' logic would then merely be the sense in which it is incoherent to describe God as acting contrary to his essential nature.

Jesus *did not* singularly atone for our sins. It also rules out an infinite number of other logically incompatible claims: e.g., that Buddha singularly atoned for our sins, that Napoleon singularly atoned for our sins, and so forth. So, we rightly rely on the laws of logic in our descriptions about anything.

John Wesley insisted in his *Address to Clergy* that the competent interpreter of scripture must rely on logic. Wesley took for granted that a knowledge of scripture is impossible without it.

May we not say, that the knowledge of one [of the sciences], although now quite unfashionable, is even necessary next, and in order, to the knowledge of the Scripture itself? I mean logic. For what is this, if rightly understood, but the art of good sense? of apprehending things clearly, judging truly, and reasoning conclusively?¹⁷

Wesley rightly saw that, in order to reach one conclusion about God at the expense of other possible conclusions, some sort of logical reasoning will be required.

Wood is intentionally Wesleyan in his appreciation of the need for logical coherence in our statements about God. In response to Padgett's charge of logical inconsistency, Wood is adamant that the Boethian view of eternity is entirely consistent. Wood emphasizes through a series of examples that, on an Einsteinian—as opposed to Newtonian—understanding of our physical universe, the temporal relation that an event bears to any person will depend on factors such as the speed the person is traveling. The faster a person travels, the slower time moves relative to other persons whose slower speed remains constant. Thus, “Time may go at different rates for different observers.”¹⁸ A ten minute span for a person in a rocket ship approaching the speed of light will run concurrently with the events a person on earth will experience over a much greater length of time. What this points up is that ‘simultaneity’ is determined by one’s frame of reference. And while Einsteinian physics does not prove that Boethius’s view of divine eternity is correct, Wood does see “the breakdown of simultaneity” as showing how “a Boethian view is intelligible.”¹⁹ On the other hand, Wood sees Padgett’s affirmations about time as inconsistent with the current scientific consensus about time relativity.

Since Wood’s conclusion is that the Boethian view of divine eternity is logically consistent with our current understanding of space-time, it may strike us as odd to read Wood referring to the “paradoxical reality” of Einstein’s relativity theory.²⁰ Wood also comments that quantum theory “contradicts commonsense logic.”²¹ Again, though, Wood is very much committed to the idea that the laws of logic operate without exception in our world. On closer analysis of his position, his point is simply that some things in our world may *seem* contradictory to us, given certain (mistaken) assumptions. Thus, Wood notes that the “paradoxical nature” of the simultaneity breakdown between two people’s frames of reference “is incoherent only if one absolutizes one’s own

¹⁷ John Wesley, “An Address to the Clergy,” in *The Works of John Wesley, vol. 10*, ed. T. Jackson (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2005), 483

¹⁸ Shadowitz, *Special Relativity* (Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders Co., 1968), 2.

¹⁹ Wood, “Reply to Padgett,” 18.

²⁰ Wood, “Does God Know the Future?,” 29.

²¹ Wood, “Reply to Padgett,” 13.

‘reference frame’.²² Wood’s general position is perhaps not always clear when we look at the wording he uses in some of his arguments. For instance, he states at one point that, if the idea of an ‘eternal present’ seems incoherent to us, it is because we are “trapped by common sense.”²³ But, again, the real issue in the end is not one of logic, but rather one of starting premises.

It is certainly common within the Christian tradition to note that various affirmations about God may *seem* improbable, or indeed impossible, from a certain set of background assumptions. For example, the occurrence of a miracle may always seem improbable, if not impossible, from a Humean understanding of how the evidence of experience is to be weighed against the evidence of testimony. But this point is very different than the claim that logical inferences do not always hold. Wood does not attempt to make this (problematic) latter claim. He notes that “the really substantive difference between Padgett’s view and my own” is that “we have a different understanding of contemporary physics.” Wood nowhere makes the claim that science has somehow revealed violations of the Law of Non-Contradiction; Rather, his claim is that Padgett’s charge of incoherence stems from the (legitimate) application of logical principles to mistaken premises about the nature of space-time.

Interestingly, some scientists seem to go further than Wood, interpreting certain experiments in physics as counterinstances to the laws of logic. With respect to the well-known finding that light behaves both like a wave and like a stream of particles, one conclusion is that light simply *is* both a wave and a particle. Experiments in quantum physics also regularly yield unexpected results. For example, a subatomic particle can be fired manually so that it ends up in one field *and* in another field at the same time. Such experiments led Werner Heisenberg to claim that, if we were to insist on “complete logical clarity” for our experiments, then we “would make science impossible.”²⁴

At times, Wood might seem close to endorsing the view that science has uncovered instances where the Law of Non-Contradiction is violated. He states in one passage that “Postmodern science has come to recognize the limits of deductive logic.”²⁵ Yet, in the same passage he notes that, in quantum theory, “experimental results contradict classical physics and have forced a new way of understanding the world.”²⁶ This last sentence returns us to the point that it is our *understanding of the physical world* that counterintuitive experimental results force us to reconsider. We are not forced to reconsider the universal application of the Law of Non-Contradiction. And this really is the response to scientists who might claim that an experiment generates a result that is ‘illogical’. To show that the laws of logic have been violated, a scientist would need to establish two things. First, she would need to identify the precise logical principle that has been violated. Presumably, in the case of light behaving both like a wave and like a stream of particles, the logical problem centers on identity. But can we be definite that

²² Wood, “Does God Know the Future?”, 30. Cf. Stephen Hawking on the ‘twins paradox’, where one twin travels through space nearing the speed of light, only to return to earth and find that his twin has aged much more rapidly than he has: “The twins paradox is a paradox only if one has the idea of absolute time at the back of one’s mind.” (*A Brief History of Time* (London: Bantam, 1988), 30.)

²³ Wood, “Does God Know the Future?”, 31.

²⁴ Werner Heisenberg, *Physics and Philosophy: The Revolution in Modern Physics* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1959), 86. Wood cites Heisenberg in “Reply to Padgett,” 14.

²⁵ Wood, “Reply to Padgett,” 12.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 12.

waves and streams of particles are mutually exclusive, such that, if light is a wave, it could not logically also be a stream of particles? And is the presence of a subatomic particle in one field really logically inconsistent with its presence in another field? I myself do not know the answers to these questions. But if one is to establish logical inconsistency, one would need to identify the logical principle in question and to establish that, given our categories in describing the physical world, a violation of this logical principle really has occurred.

The second thing a scientist would need to establish is that her categories in describing the world are the correct categories. That is, the scientist would need to demonstrate that her ontological taxonomy really does contain the most fundamental things that can be said about the world. If so, then a logical conflict among these categories would show that the world does not always operate with logical consistency.

This double burden of the scientist strikes me as exceedingly difficult to achieve, especially the latter one. Can we really be confident, e.g., that waves and particles capture the nature of light at its most fundamental level? And do we know enough about matter to be confident that the behavior of photons and electrons does not supervene on the activity of more ontologically fundamental physical substances? Do we know enough about space-time to be confident that two different fields within four-dimensional space-time never overlap in some way? Again, as a non-scientist I am not well placed to guide discussions on these matters. However, the current work on such topics as wormholes, dark matter, and further dimensions is rather seminal in nature. And it strikes me as virtually inevitable that our understanding of the physical universe will change substantially over the coming centuries. Certainly, I do not think we can have the kind of confidence in our current understanding of final, physical categories that should outweigh our confidence in the universal application of the Law of Non-Contradiction.

When scientists talk about experimental results being counterinstances to ‘logic’, this term may be being used in a colloquial sense, synonymous with ‘counterintuitive’. Wood himself occasionally seems to use the term in this sense. He mentions that experimental evidence in science “often contradicts the intuitive logic of commonsense.”²⁷ This phrasing is a bit unfortunate from the standpoint of the analytic philosopher, who seeks to define terms carefully. ‘Common sense’ obviously does not have its own set of logical principles. But if the point is simply that science will often generate unexpected and counterintuitive results, then the point is well taken.

Wood’s phrase can also be taken as suggesting that experimental results really will on occasion generate logical contradictions, given the physical categories scientists use. This suggestion is stronger than the point about general counterintuitiveness. Perhaps some scientists do mean to emphasize that genuine contradictions persist as we investigate certain aspects of the world. But this simply returns us to the question of how confident scientists can be that they are working with a complete understanding of the final ontological categories needed to describe fully the workings of our physical world. And again, it seems very implausible to suggest that scientists today are in such a position.

In this section we have seen little reason to think that we should appeal to violations of the laws of logic as final and accurate descriptions of things—a point that applies equally to scientists and to theologians. A natural question also arises from our discussion: What

²⁷ Ibid, 12.

positive claims *can* we make, given the recognition that our categories may not (will not?) fully capture reality? We shall explore this question in section III. But first, let us observe how Christians may need to acknowledge tensions and paradoxes in what they affirm, even if they do not resort to affirming genuine, logical contradictions.

II. Tensions, Paradoxes and Mysteries

While the majority of theologians within the Christian tradition have affirmed that accurate descriptions of God will always be logically consistent, this does not mean that there are never tensions in what Christians affirm. Let us define ‘tension’ as a general term where the truth of one affirmation seems to come at the expense of another affirmation. For instance, I might state, “A lot of people do not know this, but my Ph.D. supervisor happens to be very famous.” On the surface, these two affirmations come at the expense of one another. The more we establish the fact that lots of people do not know about my supervisor’s work, the more difficult it becomes to go on to affirm that he is very famous. Strictly speaking, there is nothing contradictory in the conjoining of these two affirmations. We might make sense of it by further explaining, e.g., that my supervisor is very famous within academic circles or that the reference to “a lot” of people still leaves room for billions of people worldwide. Still, the affirmations are in tension with one another—the truth of one tending to come at the expense of the truth of the other.

There are of course many such tensions that may characterize the affirmations Christians wish to make. The Biblical witness is that King David was a man after God’s own heart. And yet, we read of David’s apparent acknowledgement in response to Shimei that he had been a man of blood.²⁸ Seemingly, these two affirmations are in tension, although we might seek to reconcile them in various ways—e.g., by noting that God prizes humility and that David consistently admitted his mistakes and shortcomings.

Christians affirm that God is all-powerful and perfectly loving; yet they also affirm the reality of evil in our world. They affirm that God seeks to draw us into a relationship with him; yet they also affirm that God ‘hides himself’ from us in the sense that he does not make his existence as obviously clear to us as he could. While theologians have provided plausible ways to reconcile these sets of affirmations, it remains true that one affirmation will tend to come at the expense of the other affirmation.

These kinds of general tensions are surely numerous in almost any person’s set of beliefs. And the theologian is as entitled as anyone to affirm statements that may generate tensions. Admittedly, if one affirmation is in tension with enough other affirmations one wants to make, it may become irrational to continue to hold the original affirmation (provided there are not further things that tend to *confirm* the original affirmation). For instance, if the Christian affirms enough facts that tend to undermine God’s goodness, then, in the absence of data that tend to confirm God’s goodness, it will become more and more difficult to affirm it. Still, the mere fact that two statements generate the kind of general tension we have been discussing is itself not a strong reason to think both statements cannot be true.

²⁸ 2 Samuel 16. See also David’s appalling actions toward Bathsheba and Uriah in 2 Samuel 11.

Moving from the issue of tension, Christians have always appealed to a second category, *mystery*, in affirming certain things about God. This fact seems inevitable, given our position relative to God. Irenaeus explained: “we, inasmuch as we are inferior to, and later in existence than, the Word of God and His Spirit, are on that very account destitute of the knowledge of His mysteries.”²⁹ The sense of ‘mystery’ here seems to involve our inability fully to understand the workings of God. For instance, although there is no hint of contradiction in the idea that an immaterial God created our physical world, we cannot hope to provide a full, causal explanation of how God’s ‘speaking the world into existence’ brought about the formation of physical matter. Thus, Wood rightly notes that “Christian theology has always maintained the mystery that God created the world out of nothing.”³⁰ And it is surely plausible for Wood to maintain that certain aspects of God’s relationship to time will remain a mystery to us.

At the same time, in his discussion of mystery Wood’s choice of phrasing is perhaps unfortunate when he talks about our need “to acknowledge that God as Creator transcends our finite logical abilities.”³¹ In matters of the kind of mystery at issue, it is not our inability to clarify controversial theorems of *logic* that is in question (i.e., whether some theorem does or does not follow from the Law of Non-Contradiction). Rather, it is simply that we cannot offer a complete explanation of God’s nature, necessary being and workings. The appeal to mystery in offering certain descriptions of God is entirely legitimate; but we should not conflate this point with questions about our incomplete understanding of the complexities of formal logic.

Having looked briefly at the categories of tension and mystery, let us consider a third category: ‘paradox’. While this term has been defined differently by various writers, let us stipulate here that ‘paradox’ refers to an *apparent* contradiction. On this definition, Jesus’s statement, “whoever loses his life for me will find it,”³² is a paradox. Other examples include the Trinitarian doctrine that God is both three and one. On the surface these are contradictions (and not merely statements that are in tension with each other). Of course, these (apparent) contradictions are resolved in the end. True contradictions involve the claim that something both is and is not the case, at the same time and in the same way. But upon further examination, we find that the meaning of ‘life’ is not the same in Jesus’s statements about gaining life and losing it. We ‘lose’ our lives in the sense of offering control of our lives to God, serving others, deferring to others’ interests, and so forth. We ‘gain’ life in the sense of finding ultimate joy and fulfilling our divinely-given vocation. Similarly, a Trinitarian theology does not claim that God is ‘three’ in the same sense that he is “one”. God is said to have one essence and to be one, unified being; he is said to be three persons. The claim that God is both one person and three persons *would* be a genuine contradiction. But the claim that God is one being and three persons is not a contradiction. The surface claim that Jesus is both three and one is a paradox. Admittedly, it remains a mystery how there could be an eternal, self-sustaining, tri-personal being in the first place. But there is nothing internally

²⁹ Irenaeus, “Against Heresies,” *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981), 1:399.

³⁰ Wood, “Does God Know the Future?”, 24-5.

³¹ *Ibid*, 20.

³² Matt. 16:25

inconsistent either about the concept of God or the concept of a God who is a tri-personal being.

It is easy enough for Christians to affirm paradoxes when we know how the paradox is to be resolved on closer analysis. The more difficult issue is whether we should continue to affirm paradoxes even when we do not know how they are to be resolved. It seems legitimate to affirm paradoxes when we can at least offer plausible ways in which the paradox *might* be resolved. For example, in affirming that Jesus Christ was both fully human and fully divine, we might appeal to the so-called ‘kenotic theory’ whereby Christ is understood to have ‘emptied himself’ of his divine attributes while incarnate here on earth. Or, we might explain how Jesus Christ could have *two natures*—a divine one and human one—and yet remain *one person* by arguing that there is nothing essential about a human nature that precludes one from also having a divine nature. To be sure, there are possible objections to both theories. One might question whether it is possible for God to empty himself of, for example, omniscience and still retain the properties essential to God. And one might question whether any ‘two natures’ account of Jesus Christ actually leads to the problematic conclusion that Jesus was *two persons* in *one body*. Still, each approach seems at least a plausible way of responding to the objection that Jesus could not have been both fully human and fully divine. With no compelling reason to think that these two affirmations *cannot* therefore be resolved, it seems legitimate for the Christian to make both affirmations (given, of course, that the Christian thinks there is good reason to arrive at each conclusion individually).

But what if we can see no plausible way of resolving the paradox? Should we still maintain that a given set of affirmations *is* a paradox that can be resolved? One might be very tempted to say ‘no’ here. After all, if we can see no plausible way of resolving two or more affirmations, then, as far as we know, we have an actual contradiction. And if we adopt the pattern of accepting new statements even if they seem, as best we can tell, to contradict other beliefs we hold, then we return to the troubles we noted at the beginning of section I regarding how we identify heresy or state the uniqueness of Christianity.

Perhaps many Christians will want to say that, in some cases, God’s revelation to us in scripture may lead us to affirm two statements that, as far as we can tell, seem contradictory. To be sure, this suggestion prompts the immediate rejoinder that we rely heavily on the idea of logical consistency to arrive at an interpretation of a passage of scripture. And here we can think back here to Wesley’s comments on the need to employ logic if we are to have any knowledge of scripture. A given passage of scripture will have any number of possible interpretations; and we eliminate alternative interpretations primarily on the basis of how they (fail to) cohere with other affirmations we interpret scripture as making. So, we seemingly face the daunting task of identifying the criteria which the Christian will use in eliminating some interpretations due to apparent logical inconsistency while affirming some other interpretations despite apparent logical inconsistency.

Still, let us suppose that the Christian comes to the conclusion that, on the basis of revelation, our best attempts to describe God simply must include two affirmations that, as far as we can tell, are logically inconsistent. At this point, instead of positing that the laws of logic might somehow be suspended within the heavenly realm, we would do

better to consider the extent to which the categories we have been using to speak about God are adequate. And this leads us to the subject of models.

III. The Use of Models

In defending Boethius's description of an 'eternal present', Wood joins authors such as Norman Kretzmann and Elenore Stump in emphasizing the relativity of 'simultaneity'. Put briefly, the question of whether someone is 'simultaneous' with some event will depend on particulars of that person. For instance, a person traveling near the speed of light will be simultaneous with a different set of events than a person traveling at a slower speed. And a three-dimensional figure will view simultaneously all the points on a one-dimensional line, while an imaginary one-dimensional person on that line will understand all but one point on the line to be either past or future. Building on this idea that the notion of 'simultaneity' is person-relative, these authors then propose that God is simultaneous with all events in human history, while a human is of course simultaneous with only those events occurring at one particular slice of time.

Richard Swinburne has objected to this appeal to simultaneity as being too suggestive to shed any real light on God's relationship to time. He first notes the "inner incoherence" of the surface claim that God is "simultaneously present" at what I did yesterday, today, and tomorrow. If God is simultaneous with these events in the same sense that I am simultaneous with any event, then clearly "yesterday would be the same day as today and as tomorrow—which is clearly nonsense."³³ To avoid this consequence, "we would have to understand 'simultaneously' in a somewhat special stretched sense."³⁴ Yet Swinburne questions whether this stretched sense of the term (which its advocates have yet to define precisely and to distinguish from our normal understanding of the term) can be used to defend the idea of 'eternal-temporal' simultaneity.

to call the notion 'ET-simultaneity' suggests that what has been defined has some analogy to normal simultaneity, and no reason has been given for supposing that it does. Hence no reason has been given for supposing that if God has an existence outside (our) time, he can have any relation to the events of time which would be in any way analogous to 'causing' or 'observing' them.³⁵

In short, the proposal that an eternal God can be 'simultaneous' to all earthly events merely suggests some sort of analogy to the sense in which we are present to various events. But without specifying the sense in which eternal-temporal simultaneity is (and is not) like two temporal events being simultaneous, we gain no more insight into God's relationship to time than is suggested by the term 'simultaneous', which is simply chosen as a description of how God relates to time.

As discussed in section I, Wood wants to emphasize that Einsteinian physics *does* give us real insight into the way in which God can be temporally present to events that, from our perspective, will be either past or future. We can take his repeated appeals to the

³³ Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 228.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 228.

³⁵ Richard Swinburne, "God and Time," in *Reasoned Faith*, ed. E. Stump and N. Kretzmann (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993).

scientific literature emphasizing the relative aspects of ‘simultaneity’ as a response to the charge that this term is merely suggestive of the sense in which an eternal God can be present to all events of human history. Yet, Wood offers a further kind of response when engaging with the arguments of Richard Swinburne and Alan Padgett. He wonders at times whether these analytic philosophers are open to the kinds of themes to which we will invariably need to appeal as we describe God. These themes stem from our inability to understand fully—let alone capture in public language—God’s nature and his relationship to our world. Wood discusses Church Fathers like Origen, who “spoke of the stretching of language in the Bible when it attempts to speak of God as a personal reality who is involved in time.”³⁶ And indeed there are ample quotes from the Fathers along the lines of Clement of Alexandria’s general statement:

Wherefore let no one imagine that hands, and feet, and mouth, and eyes, and going in and coming out, and resentments and threats, are said by the Hebrews to be attributes of God. By no means; but that certain of these appellations are used more sacredly in an allegorical sense.³⁷

Wood presses at times this theme in Christian theology that we must use language to describe God, fully aware that our language is at best an approximation of the full truth about God.

With an appreciation of this point, we can perhaps see why Wood’s choice of language is not as unambiguous as an analytic philosopher might prefer. He remarks that, “Even as the speed of light transcends every reference frame, it can be thought that God embraces all space-time reference frames.”³⁸ And again, that “God transcends time and yet time is real to the essence of God.”³⁹ He quotes with approval Gregory of Nyssa’s statement that the Trinity “is not in time, but time flows from it.”⁴⁰ Wood’s commentary is that, “Just as postmodern science must use dialectical ways of speaking, so the Early Greek Church Fathers and Boethius were forced to speak in dialectical ways as well.”⁴¹ This appeal to ‘dialectical’ speaking is Wood’s way of emphasizing that our language is always an approximation when we use it to speak of God. We recognize the limitations of old descriptions, as well as the limitations of any new descriptions we might use as replacements.

Wood is certainly correct in noting that scientists and theologians alike rely heavily on approximate, analogical language, which indicates the use of models. As a best attempt at understanding certain physical phenomena, scientists often appeal to other, better known physical phenomena. For example, in understanding the behavior of molecules, scientists may offer the model of billiard balls, which we can readily observe bouncing off each other and off the billiard table cushions. Thus, in describing a rise in air pressure within a container, a scientist may talk about the molecules within the container

³⁶ Wood, “Does God Know the Future?”, 17.

³⁷ Clement of Alexandria, “The Stromata, or Miscellanies,” *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 2:460.

³⁸ Wood, “Does God Know the Future?”, 30.

³⁹ Wood, “Reply to Padgett,” 12.

⁴⁰ Gregory of Nyssa, “Against Eunomius,” *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. P. Shaff and H. Wace, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976), 5:69.

⁴¹ Wood, “Reply to Padgett,” 15.

‘bouncing’ more frequently off the walls of the container and off each other. This increased activity is used to explain, e.g., why the temperature in the container rises. Of course, a molecule does not behave *exactly* like a billiard ball. Rather, the model of a billiard ball allows us to understand and predict the behavior of molecules.

Theologians of course rely on models as well. The descriptions of God as father, shepherd, and king are examples. Typically, Christians are quick to emphasize that God is best described using the conjunction of multiple models. Thus, the combination of father, shepherd and king more accurately reflects God’s full character and interaction with us than any of those models in isolation. Even so, Wood wants (rightly) to note that all our models—as we juxtapose them in what Wood calls ‘dialectical’ ways of speaking—will at most give us partial knowledge of God.

Wood’s way of making this point is perhaps not always as clear as it might be. After noting that writers like Stump and Kretzman have shown that Boethius’s view of divine eternity is coherent, he comments on Alan Padgett’s charge of incoherence.

Padgett does not agree with this logic, but I believe his either/or thinking does not allow him to appreciate the nature of dialectical thinking. To insist that theological language must correspond to the intuitive logic of ordinary human experience seems too anthropomorphic to me.⁴²

There are seemingly a number of potential issues raised here, but among them is our current issue of whether language about God remains analogical. If so, then the categories and terms we use in constructing models for God may sometimes lead us to conclusions which we cannot logically reconcile. But this should not surprise us, given that our categories are not final, ontological categories—but rather our best attempts to describe God given our limited taxonomy of categories.

A natural question arises at this point: What should we do when we find that two claims we make about God are, as best we can tell, logically inconsistent. If we believe these claims are fully accurate, ontological descriptions of God, then we face the problems discussed in section I if we affirm them both. But what if we believe them to be models of God and thus *not* to be fully accurate descriptions of God using final ontological categories?

This question is not unknown to the scientific community. Niels Bohr developed his ‘principle of complementarity’ in response to the manner in which light behaves both as waves and as particles. Although these two categories are thought to be mutually exclusive, scientists have wanted to affirm both of them as models for light. Otherwise, we cannot account for the full range of behavior we observe from light. Importantly, though, scientists need not be committed to saying that light both *is* a wave and *is* a particle. Rather, we are led to *explain* or *describe* the behavior of light using both models; we are led to *think of* light in terms of both waves and particles.

The ‘principle of complementarity’ opens the door for the theologian to insist that we might indeed come to mutually exclusive conclusions about God. A commitment to each of these conclusions might constitute our best description of God—‘best’ in the sense that it accounts for the full range of information we have about God, based on God’s interaction in human history. As a preliminary point, if we find ourselves in such a

⁴² Wood, “Reply to Padgett,” 11.

position, we will need to acknowledge that our descriptions of God are indeed models and not final ontological descriptions about God as God really is. Otherwise, we revisit the problems discussed in section I that come with affirming final contradictions. Having noted this point, the theologian now faces a number of questions that arise from an appeal to the principle of complementarity. I shall mention three.

First, given that models rely on some sort of analogy, the task remains to specify the respective senses in which the analogy does and does not hold. Sometimes this task is fairly straightforward. In affirming God as our heavenly ‘father’, one of the obvious ways in which the analogy to an earthly father breaks down is that God is sexless. One of the obvious ways in which the analogy *holds* is that both God and one’s earthly father causally contribute to our existence by some means of generation. Still, for many models we might use in describing God and God’s relationship to our world, the implications of the model remain disputed by Christians. For instance, in affirming that God is a ‘loving Father’, God’s dispositions and actions must bear at least *some* clear resemblance to our best examples of a loving, earthly father. Is Calvin’s affirmation of double election at odds with the affirmation that God is a loving father? Our answer will depend on whether double election is decisively at odds with the set of examples through which we understand the meaning of term ‘loving father’. If so, then we cannot affirm that ‘God is a loving father’ without that affirmation losing all meaning for us. The affirmation ‘God is a loving father’ would simply amount to the affirmation ‘God is God’, whatever that involves (i.e., whatever the set of examples with which that affirmation is consistent). In short, the question of whether two affirmations about God are mutually exclusive will sometimes hinge on the way we spell out the analogy involved in these affirmations.

Second, theologians face the question of whether the models themselves can be reformulated. Within science, advancements often take the form of new and improved models—i.e., models which better account for all the data that needs explaining. Thus, astronomers studying our solar system shifted from a geocentric model to a heliocentric model; and physicists studying combustion shifted from models involving phlogiston to models involving oxygen and nitrogen. However, the Christian tradition has affirmed historically that many of the models we use in talking about God have been *given* to us by God. Of course, we may need to make judgments about whether certain models in scripture (e.g., God as ‘father’) and in the Creeds (e.g., that Jesus Christ was one person with two natures) are in fact unique in their divine inspiration and divinely-sanctioned use among confessing Christians. If so, then such models arguably are not open to revision. Unlike in science, usefulness would not be the crucial criterion as to when it is appropriate to adopt a new model.

Third, questions remain as to whether, and in what ways, we are committed to final, ontological claims about God when we make use of models. The early Church settled on the description of Jesus Christ as one person with both a divine and human nature because this description was needed to account for the full range of information it had pertaining to the words and work of Jesus Christ. Remembering our example from science of light as both wave and particle, we noted that scientists need not be committed to saying that light both *is* a wave and *is* a particle. Rather, the point of holding the two models was that it allowed scientists to explain the *behavior* of light. Is it sufficient for the theologian to affirm that Jesus Christ *behaved* as one with both a divine and human

nature? Or are corresponding ontological claims needed in order for the Creeds about Jesus Christ to serve a genuine professions of Christian faith?

The three general issues I have raised related to the use of models—how we specify the limits to our analogies, whether models can appropriately be reformulated, and whether models commit us to ontological claims—are by no means exhaustive. Still, they seem to be key questions. I do not attempt here to give definitive answers to the questions, even where definitive answers might be sought. Rather, I raise the questions simply to note them as issues with which we are faced when we use models in our descriptions of God.

IV. Aspects of Truth and Knowledge

We have noted that some of Wood's references to our limited, "anthropomorphic" language raise issues related to the use of models when speaking about God. Other references to human language seem to raise still further issues having to do with human limitations and even with the limitations of logic. Consider one of the reasons Wood cites as to why we might be tempted to reject Boethius's view of eternity: "I also believe that our understanding of this issue is confused if we are locked within a modernist notion of truth—as if the intent of language and propositions is to mirror reality literally based on the intuitive logic of ordinary human experience."⁴³ At this point Wood appeals to the work of philosophers such as Richard Rorty, who argues that "the idea that words must mirror reality in a literalist sense truncates the larger meaning of truth."⁴⁴ Instead of thinking that our language about God must "mirror" real, objective facts about God, Wood finds promise in the ideas of theologians such as Paul Ricoeur that we should "appreciate the nature of figurative and poetic language as a valid means of understanding the nature of things and God."⁴⁵

It is unclear, though, just what all this has to do with the nature of *truth*. It seems more natural to think of the kinds of language limitations Wood mentions as indicating the kinds of *knowledge* we might have outside of propositional knowledge, which has been the standard kind of knowledge discussed by early modern philosophers and their commentators. Consider Wood's reference to the sort of scientific knowledge Roger Penrose has sought to identify.

[Penrose] argues that the mind is capable of engaging in non-computational understanding that transcends mathematics and logic...Mathematics and the principles of logic are indispensable tools for explaining things and cannot be dismissed as irrelevant, but they have their limitations because there is a dimension of truth that can be derived only from the non-mathematical activity of conscious thinking in general.⁴⁶

Again, I suppose it is possible to spell out this issue in terms of "dimensions of truth." However, I think a much more natural way to explore this issue is to bring out the different kinds of knowledge we can have.

⁴³ Wood, "Reply to Padgett," 12.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 12.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 12.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 14.

Philosophers and theologians alike have recognized that some kinds of knowledge do not seem readily reducible to propositional knowledge. The example of *knowing someone* is arguably not reducible simply to knowing propositions *about* that person. Theologians have long made use of this point in talking about the kind of knowledge gained by those who have a personal relationship with God. Also, *knowledge how* to do something seems difficult to reduce simply to knowing propositions. For someone who had never ridden a bicycle, reading a long list of instructions about ‘how to ride a bicycle’ hardly allows the person to say that she ‘knows how’ to ride a bicycle.

In criticizing the idea that we should think of our language about God as simply “mirroring” God, perhaps Woods is seeking to bring out the point that the kind of knowledge we can have of God is not simply reducible to propositional statements which correspond to facts about God. If so, then I will agree. However, I think we would do well to set aside references to different “dimensions of truth.” I think we find various issues conflated within most attempts to challenge the traditional correspondence model of truth. And I myself am dubious that a decisive objection to the model will—indeed can—be raised. At any rate, I do not think that Wood needs to appeal to notions of truth to make his general point that our knowledge of God, sometimes gained through personal encounter and sometimes best captured through poetry, will escape reduction to propositional statements. And since we apply logic to the relations between propositional statements, our knowledge of God will sometimes therefore escape logical analysis.

Perhaps the time is right for theologians to recapture the medieval emphasis on contemplation. The rise of the so-called scientific method over the past 400 years has led to theological discussions often taking the form of scientific inquiries. Specific questions are identified, and answers are then sought by investigating the information available to us. To be sure, this method can lead us to deeper understandings in both science and in theology. Wood’s discussion of time and divine eternity highlights this fact. However, it is worth asking why much of the Christian tradition historically has commended as part of one’s spiritual formation the practice of contemplation, where one allows oneself to be shaped by experiences with God. This is in contrast to the scientific method of identifying specific questions at the outset and then seeking answers to them—with the answers only amounting to genuine answers if they correspond to the pre-arranged categories that give the original questions their content.

The practice of contemplation might be one conclusion suggested by Wood’s assertions that our language about God should not become too “anthropomorphic” and should not be always be analyzed in terms of logical relations. Admittedly, Wood’s discussion of divine eternity is not in the mode of contemplation. In fact, his discussion assumes that scientists and theologians are engaged in largely the same project, even sharing largely the same methodology. At the same time, he may be (rightly) hinting at the limits of the theologian’s adaptation of the scientist’s method.

Conclusion

In this essay I have tried to show why we should, and ultimately must, rely on logic in making affirmations about God. I have sought to distinguish genuine logical contradictions from tensions, paradoxes, and mysteries, of which the Christian tradition

has always made use in describing God and God's interaction with our world. I have discussed the use of models, to which theologians will inevitably need to appeal in describing the God who transcends our world. And I have noted different kinds of knowledge we might have of God, where logical analysis may not always be applicable. All these issues are introduced at various points within Wood's discussion of divine eternity. I have simply sought to disentangle some of these issues. My goal has not so much been to settle these issues, but rather to identify the issues with which we will need to wrestle as we seek coherent descriptions of this God whom we will be seeking to understand more fully for all eternity.