

Taming Zootheism: On Equality, Fairness, and Incarnation

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Abstract: Blake Hereth has recently argued for *zootheism*, the view that God has incarnated as a non-human animal. I argue that zootheism is compatible with orthodox Christianity, and that at least one argument for it has some force. But I also argue that Hereth's *version* of zootheism conflicts with orthodox Christianity, as do some of the arguments Hereth uses to motivate it. And then I argue that the elements of Hereth's view which conflict with orthodox Christianity are independently implausible anyway: the conflicting details are better filled in in other ways, and the conflicting arguments fail. Recognizing this yields a version of zootheism which is in harmony with orthodox Christianity while still having a philosophical motivation.

1. Introduction

Blake Hereth (2019) claims perfect being theists should accept *zootheism*, the view that "some non-human animals are divine" (183).¹ Christians think a human, Jesus, is divine; the zootheist believes the same is true of at least one non-human animal. As a Christian, I don't *oppose* zootheism. Zootheism itself is (I claim) compatible with Christianity, and I think at least one argument for it has some force. But Hereth's *version* of zootheism, while bold and innovative, conflicts with orthodox Christianity. If the arguments for this version were strong enough, they might double as arguments against orthodox Christianity. But I think these parts of the position can be rejected: I think the relevant arguments for zootheism fail, and the details can be satisfactorily fleshed out in other ways. So this paper has two aims. The first is to argue against some aspects of Hereth's view which I think are independently implausible, or at least insufficiently motivated. The second, more significant aim is to show that, having eliminated these, we can have a version of zootheism which is in harmony with orthodox Christianity while still having a philosophical motivation.

In section two, I explain why there is no very serious conflict between Christianity and zootheism *as such*. In section three, I discuss an argument from Hereth for zootheism which I think is reasonably good. In section four, I discuss

¹ All citations of Hereth are from Hereth (2019).

Hereth's "Power Argument" for zootheism. In section five, I discuss Hereth's "Solidarity Argument" for zootheism. In section six, I discuss Hereth's argument for the claim that a divine person has *eternally* been a non-human animal. In section seven, I discuss an argument from Hereth which implies that there must be more than three divine persons. I think the arguments discussed in sections four through seven all conflict with orthodox Christianity. But I also think they fail. By removing these elements, we resolve the conflicts with orthodox Christianity, and do so without (wholly) undercutting zootheism's philosophical support.

2. Zootheism and Christianity

There is no *immediate* conflict between zootheism and orthodox Christianity. As far as I know, it is not explicitly denied in the Bible or in any authoritative creeds or councils. And I don't think there is any *metaphysical* barrier to its truth, even given God's having incarnated as Jesus. The metaphysical possibility of multiple divine incarnations has been defended by historical authors such as Aquinas (Pawl 2019, ch. 2) and by contemporary authors like Oliver Crisp (2009, ch. 8), Tom Flint (2011), and Tim Pawl (2019, chs. 2–3). (For references to many more sources which discuss the issue, see Pawl 2019, ch. 2, fn.1). Ockham believed specifically that the Son could have assumed the nature of a non-human animal (Adams 2006, 198). Aquinas denied that God could have incarnated as a non-rational animal, but this is because he thought their natures were not sufficiently dignified for God's doing so to be appropriate, not because it was otherwise impossible (Pawl 2019, 39–41). However, the arguments for zootheism claim that God does have good reason to incarnate as a non-human animal, so that doing so is appropriate after all. If these succeed, they would undermine Aquinas' objection.

Of course, even if zootheism doesn't *explicitly contradict* orthodoxy and is metaphysically *possible*, it may be that Christianity makes zootheism unlikely. The theologian David Clough (2013, 82) presents four relevant arguments, though he is targeting, not zootheism as such, but a specific version of zootheism according to which (i) God incarnates in each species, and (ii) members of each species are saved by, and only by, the work of the incarnation in their species (dolphins are reconciled to God by, and only by, the God-dolphin, etc.) Clough's first criticism is that it "seems odd and over complex" to "divide God's work of reconciliation into millions of species-specific acts." Oliver Crisp (2009, 173) echoes this point, writing that if Christ's salvific work is sufficient, then "more than one Incarnation would be superfluous." (Crisp is not considering zootheism specifically, but rather the general idea that there might be multiple divine incarnations.) I suppose the idea is that God wouldn't incarnate multiple times without good reason. This might establish a presumption against zootheism. But, again, the arguments for zootheism claim that there *is* a good reason for multiple incarnations (cf. Hereth 203-204, fn 17). So this argument seems conclusive only if the arguments for zootheism fail.

Clough's other arguments (2013, 82) specifically target the idea that salvific work might be divided among species-specific incarnations. His second argument is

that “New Testament texts and later Christian theologians saw the Christ-event as having a universal and cosmic significance,” making it “disturbingly anti-climactic to restrict the work of Christ to one among the myriad creatures of God.” Crisp agrees, writing (2009, 170) that “there is some evidence from the New Testament that Christ’s Incarnation has cosmic significance as a once-for-all event in which God is reconciling the whole of creation to himself, not merely human beings.”

Clough’s third criticism (2013, 82) is that if Christ saved only humans, “we would have to become agnostic about God’s purposes for other creatures . . . we would have to say we know God cares about us; as for the rest we cannot tell,” whereas actually “many biblical texts [affirm] God’s care for other creatures.” Clough’s final argument is that since “evolutionary biology makes clear that species boundaries are surprisingly hard to define and not static,” “it would be a serious theological mistake to make the salvation of creatures dependent on their neat sorting into species-sized boxes.”

But it isn’t essential to zootheism that salvific work be divided among incarnations. One could hold that salvation is overdetermined, with Christ’s work sufficient to reconcile all creation, but with the work of other incarnations also sufficient to reconcile at least part of it. Or one could hold that Christ uniquely saves all creation, and the other incarnations occur for some other reason (see sec. 3). Clough’s second, third, and fourth arguments don’t apply to versions of zootheism which lack this division of salvific labor.

I think the best Christian argument against zootheism *as such* is probably an argument from silence. Nothing in revelation explicitly indicates that zootheism is true. If something did, that would obviously be evidence *for* zootheism, conditional upon Christianity; it follows from standard Bayesian epistemology that the lack of indication is evidence against zootheism, conditional upon Christianity (cf. Manley forthcoming).² But the strength of this evidence depends on how surprising it is that God wouldn’t reveal zootheism to us, if it’s true. I don’t see that it’s *wildly* surprising. Clough (2013, 82) suggests that God might decide it wasn’t any of our business: “We know nothing of such incarnations—why should we?—but our ignorance is not a disproof of the thesis.” Or perhaps God thought it would be good for us to explore the possibility of zootheism on our own, through philosophical argumentation (cf. Crummett 2015). Whatever the reason, there are clearly many interesting theological questions whose truths God has not revealed to us; perhaps zootheism is among them. So I think this argument from silence provides some grounds for Christians to reject zootheism, but not decisive grounds.

But suppose that the argument of this section is incorrect, and there is a very serious conflict between orthodox Christianity and zootheism *as such*. I think later sections still show that the conflict between orthodox Christianity and Hereth’s

² Specifically, on standard Bayesianism, O is evidence for H iff $P(O|H) > P(O|\sim H)$. Since probabilities sum to one, if $P(O|H) > P(O|\sim H)$, then $P(\sim O|\sim H) > P(\sim O|H)$. (Suppose $P(O|H) = .2$ and $P(O|\sim H) = .1$. Then $P(\sim O|H) = .8$ and $P(\sim O|\sim H) = .9$.) But if $P(\sim O|\sim H) > P(\sim O|H)$, then $\sim O$ is evidence for $\sim H$, by the Bayesian conception of evidence. Of course, similar reasoning implies that the fact that revelation does not explicitly *deny* zootheism is evidence for it. But probably it is more surprising that God would fail to mention zootheism’s truth, if it’s true, than that God would fail to mention its falsity, if its false, so that the evidence is stronger in one direction than the other.

version of zootheism is significantly *more* serious still. Someone who is willing to compromise on orthodoxy in principle, but who nonetheless would like to minimize conflicts with it, might then still find value in my “tamed” version of zootheism.

3. The Fittingness Argument

One of Hereth’s (197–199)³ arguments for zootheism claims that it might be *fitting* for God to incarnate as a non-human animal. One strain of Christian theology suggests that God might incarnate as a human being because this would be appropriate in virtue of the excellences which human nature possesses. As Swinburne (1994, 218) says, “human nature is such a good thing that . . . It would be appropriate for its creator to put on such a nature, as it is for a designer to wear a coat he has designed.” Hereth claims that if this argument works, parity of reasoning would also support God’s incarnating as a non-human animal, since such beings have excellences of their own, not possessed by humans.⁴

I won’t say much about this, because I agree. I think it’s plausible that it would be good for God to incarnate as a non-human animal, that this provides some reason to think God might do so, and that this in turn provides some reason to take zootheism seriously. (I’m not arguing for this here, just expressing my agreement with Hereth’s argument.) But I’ll note that I don’t think this is a *decisive* argument for zootheism. Suppose no reasons count *against* a divine person’s incarnating as an animal. I deny that God must do every good thing possible, even when there’s no reason against doing it; in fact, I suspect that for every possible world, there is a better one, so that it is simply not possible for God to realize all the undefeated goods which he in principle might (cf. Chan and Crummett 2019). So, while this gives some reason to think God might incarnate as a non-human animal, I don’t think it *establishes* zootheism. (I’ll note that Hereth does not take an explicit stand on this issue either way: ze does not say whether fittingness merely *supports* zootheism, or actually entails it.)

This is significant partly because we might also think that it would be fitting for a divine person to incarnate as *each one* of many different animal species, as well as perhaps as different types of humans (since different humans possess different excellences). If fittingness *entailed* incarnation, we might have to believe in an immense variety of incarnations. Hereth’s other arguments for zootheism do imply this, and I argue below that this is theologically problematic. But if I’m right that fittingness of the sort in question here provides only a non-binding reason, endorsing the Fittingness Argument won’t have this implication.

³ Hereth treats the Fittingness Argument discussed here and the Solidarity Argument discussed below as parts of a single “Incarnation Argument.” I have separated them here because I think they raise importantly different issues, and my evaluations of them are different.

⁴ For an interesting medieval Islamic argument for a similar claim about animal excellences, see Brethren of Purity 2012, chs. 3–4.

4. The Power Argument

4.1 The Argument

Hereth (185-195) also provides a *Power Argument* for zootheism. Hereth (186) says “everyone should believe” a claim ze calls *Divine Asymmetry*:

Divine Asymmetry: If God is both omnipotent and a member of group *G*, and if *S* is neither a member of group *G* nor omnipotent (and if no one else outside of *G* is omnipotent), then *G* has a decisive power asymmetry over *S* (185).

Hereth’s defense of Divine Asymmetry focuses on defending the claim that an omnipotent being stands in a decisive power asymmetry over non-omnipotent beings (186); the further inference from this being’s possessing decisive power to *groups of which it is a part* possessing that power is taken for granted. I’ll question this inference; see section 4.3.

Hereth then endorses several principles regarding fair power distribution (185–189). The weakest principle which suffices to run the Power Argument, and therefore the one I’ll focus on, is the *Shared Power Presumption*:

Shared Power Presumption: If *A* and *B* both have moral interests concerning *X* and their (pre-consensual) distribution of power over *X* is maximally fair, then neither *A* nor *B* has presumptive decisive power over *X* (189).

It’s a “presumption” because my claim to power can be forfeited if I abuse it (187–188). “Pre-consensual” is there because I may be able to voluntarily waive my claim (188). I’m not sure if Hereth offers a definition of “decisive power,”⁵ but an intuitive definition might be something like: *A* has decisive power over *X* if *A* can unilaterally decide what happens regarding *X*, and can do so with impunity, so that *B* has no effective, practical recourse in the event of *A*’s making a decision they oppose (see section 4.4). Notice that this has the implication (which Hereth wants (189)) that I can *have* decisive power without exercising it: what’s relevant is that I *can* unilaterally decide the issue, even if I don’t (again, see section 4.4).

Hereth motivates the Shared Power Presumption via appeal to cases like the thought-experimental city of Stella. Stella’s white residents “fully control the city’s government.” Fortunately, they use their power to “make decisions that benefit white and non-white citizens alike, and benefit them equally” (186). Hereth plausibly suggests that this situation, while better than one in which the white citizens abuse their power, is still “less than maximally fair” in light of the power differential (187).

⁵ Hereth says that “If, for example, *A* has *decisive* power over *X* (and *B* doesn’t), then *B* lacks meaningful power over *X*” (189). I’m not sure if this is a definition or just a statement, but either way, I don’t think it’s right. Hereth wants us to be able to distinguish “between having decisive power over *X* and using decisive power over *X*” (ibid.). I might have the ability to unilaterally decide an issue, but refrain from exercising it and let you decide it instead. In that case, it seems false to say that you “lack meaningful power” over the issue, even though your power is contingent upon my will.

As this example (and the later course of the argument; see sec. 4.3) makes clear, “*A*” and “*B*” in the Shared Power Presumption are supposed to be able to stand for *groups*, as well as for individuals. Among other things, this raises certain questions about what it is for a group, as such, to have moral interests, but I’ll set those aside. Hereth is also not explicit about the connection between a group, *G*’s, standing in a “decisive power asymmetry over *S*” (as mentioned in Divine Asymmetry) and *G*’s having decisive power over *S* with regard to some particular issue *X* (as mentioned in the Shared Power Presumption). It can’t mean *G* has decisive power regarding *any* issue *X*. *X* could be settled by a necessary truth, *S*’s libertarian free choice, etc. I’ll say that if *G* has a decisive power asymmetry over *S*, then *G* has presumptive, pre-consensual decisive power over *S* regarding any issue *X* which also meets Condition *Y*, where “Condition *Y*” is a placeholder representing whatever restrictions are necessary to address worries like those just mentioned.

Hereth thinks this provides the basis for a zootheistic argument (189–190). What follows is my reconstruction of Hereth’s less-formally-stated argument. There is some issue *X*’ and some animal *S*’ such that (i) *S*’ and the group Human both have moral interests concerning *X*’, (ii) *S*’ isn’t omnipotent and isn’t a member of the group Human, and (iii) *X*’ meets Condition *Y*. (Hereth doesn’t give an example, but thinks something like this is plausible if “many . . . members of both [the group] Human and [the group Non-human] Animal have moral interests” (189), an assumption I grant.) God is omnipotent and a member of the group Human (due to incarnating as Jesus). Further, if God incarnated as a human but zootheism is false, “no one else outside of [the group Human] is omnipotent.”⁶ It follows from this and Divine Asymmetry (as understood by me, above) that if zootheism is false, the group Human has presumptive, pre-consensual decisive power over *S*’ regarding *X*’. But this is less than maximally fair, by the Shared Power Presumption. Hereth thinks that God’s bringing about this less-than-maximally-fair situation by incarnating as a human but not an animal would make *God* less than maximally fair (which I suppose means: God wouldn’t possess the virtue of fairness to a maximal degree).⁷ But Anselmian theism is true. And if Anselmian is true, God is maximally fair: “We should think not only that God avoids being unfair, which is the minimum standard of fairness, but that God is instead the exemplar of moral perfection,” so that maximal fairness is an “essential divine property” (189). So, to avoid creating a less-than-maximally-fair power

⁶ This wording, taken from the antecedent of Divine Asymmetry, is problematic for two reasons. First, as Tim Pawl pointed out to me, it may mean that the antecedent is not satisfied, even if zootheism is false. The usual Christian view is that the Father and Holy Spirit are omnipotent and not part of the group Human. Second, it may mean that the antecedent is satisfied, even if zootheism is true. If God also incarnates as a non-human, this wouldn’t obviously make it true that someone “else” outside of Human is omnipotent. I will assume that the principle can be somehow reworded to avoid these worries.

⁷ Hereth doesn’t explicitly state the moral principle which licenses this inference. If merely bringing about a less-than-maximally-fair situation makes God less than maximally fair, and if Anselmian theism implies God’s maximal fairness, then Anselmian theism is false, since God brought about the world, which contains many unfair situations (cf. Hereth 203, fn. 12). Perhaps we could say that God’s bringing about *this particular* less-than-maximally fair situation makes God less-than-maximally fair, when bringing about others does not, because God is somehow directly implicated in the lack of maximal fairness here, or because God brings it about unnecessarily, or whatever.

asymmetry by incarnating only as a human, God will also incarnate as a non-human animal. So zootheism is true.

4.2 Implications

Hereth's argument, if successful, has at least two potential implications which are in tension with traditional Christianity. First, it requires that many human beings other than Jesus are divine. The same reasoning which implied that it is less than maximally fair for only a human to be assumed by God will also imply that it is less than maximally fair for just one human who is only a member of some social groups and not others to be assumed by God. If Jesus is the only human incarnation of God, this will place the group Men in a decisive power asymmetry over the group Women, and so on. Hereth agrees: ze writes that the "the Power Argument supports not only the inclusion of non-human animals within the Godhead, but also disabled individuals, people of color, queer individuals, women, etc." (192). Given the vast number of social groups, and that no one human can be a member of more than a fraction of them, this implies, not only that there will be human incarnations besides Jesus, but that there will be a vast number.

But this represents a tension with orthodox Christianity. Certainly the argument from silence has more force here. It seems more obviously important for us to know if there have been, or will be, large numbers of other *human* incarnations, and so more surprising that God wouldn't have revealed this to us. Further, this implication seems independently implausible. Since social groups pass in and out of existence over time, and since oppressed groups sometimes stop being oppressed (e.g., Irish-Americans), the natural thought is that many of these incarnations must have already happened, or else God would miss the chance to identify with members of these groups. But we aren't aware of large numbers of credible claims to be divine incarnations from across different times and cultures. If Anselmian theism implies that there have been many such incarnations and we have evidence against this, we have evidence against Anselmian theism (and therefore, if Christianity implies Anselmian theism, Christianity).

Second, read literally, the argument implies that *everyone* is God incarnate. Everyone's part of the group containing only themselves, so if there are omnipotent beings but we are not among them, any omnipotent beings stand in a less-than-maximally-fair power asymmetry over us. Hereth (190–191) suggests that we might block this implication by focusing only on groups with different *kinds* of interests; perhaps it would be enough if each kind of interest ("e.g., our interest against suffering or our interest against heteronormativity" (191)) was represented in God, even if some individuals are non-divine. But Hereth doesn't argue for this, or even endorse it: ze writes (190-191) that "I take no stance on whether maximal fairness requires maximal membership in the Godhead (i.e., whether each and every animal is in the Godhead). . . If maximal fairness requires that each and every individual with interests be divine, then you and I are divine, as are our animal companions." Further, *even if* the interest type proposal succeeds, it's not clear that this blocks the implication that we're all divine. It's plausible that non-divine beings have interests

of types which are not possessed by any divine person (for instance, an interest in fulfilling their purpose by achieving right relationship with their creator). By definition, no interests of a type possessed only by non-divine individuals are possessed by a divine person. So Hereth's argument seemingly implies that any non-divine individuals necessarily stand in a less-than-maximally-fair power asymmetry with the group *Divine Persons*, so that God cannot create any beings distinct from God's self at the price of God's perfection.

The claim that everyone is *currently* an incarnation of God is obviously inconsistent with traditional Christianity. It's not clear in that case why Jesus would be special. Further, if being a divine incarnation entails moral and spiritual perfection, the claim is empirically falsified. Tom Flint (2011) suggests that perhaps all saved human beings will eventually be assumed by the Son as Jesus was, thereby *becoming* divine incarnations. If we extend this view to non-human animals, perhaps we could solve the power imbalance by claiming that everyone *will eventually be* divine incarnations. There are two things to say. First, Hereth cannot accept this route: ze thinks it's unacceptable for there to be *any time* at which power is not shared between groups (189–190), and more broadly that the incarnations established by zir arguments must be *eternal* (see section 6). Second, both the philosophical plausibility and the orthodoxy of Flint's Christology have been criticized (e.g., Mullins 2015; Mullins 2017; cf. Flint 2016). If Flint's proposal fails independently, enlisting it won't help.

Anyway, I think these implications are avoided altogether, because the Power Argument fails. Perhaps a pattern of incarnations which left humans with a decisive power asymmetry over non-humans would be bad, but I deny that God's incarnating only as a human must have this effect. This doesn't help with the worry that any non-divine persons would stand in a problematic power asymmetry with divine persons. But I also deny that *this* asymmetry would be problematic, and so reject Hereth's normative claims. I discuss my objections in turn.

4.3 Against Divine Asymmetry

I reject Divine Asymmetry. The claim cannot be that God's incarnating in a group gives *every individual* member of that group decisive power over *every individual* outside it. If I'm tied up before a hungry lion, Jesus's incarnation does not give me, personally, power over the lion regarding anything. The claim would also be unsatisfactory for intersectionality-related reasons. Suppose I'm a gentile man and you're a Jewish woman. Suppose God incarnated only in Jesus, a Jewish man. The claim about individuals would imply that I (as a man) have decisive power over you, while you (being Jewish) have decisive power over me. But presumably it's impossible for us to have decisive power over each other.

The claim must instead be about giving power to the *group* Human. In general, it isn't safe to assume that a group possesses a property because a member does. I am a human and have a mother, but the group Human doesn't have a mother. And specifically, decisive power of the sort Hereth discusses only transfers to the group when shared among members of the group in the right way. Perhaps in Stella, whites,

as a group, do collectively exercise power. But suppose the usual Christian view is correct, and God incarnated as Jesus, a person of color, and not as anyone else. Surely this wouldn't mean that the group People of Color has possessed decisive power over whites all this time, and that traditional Christians have failed to realize this. Similarly, I don't see how Jesus's power is shared with humans in the way needed for it to give humans *as a group* a power advantage (or, for that matter, shared with them at all). The most we can say is that perhaps a single human, who's also God incarnate, has a decisive power advantage; I discuss whether this is ethically problematic in section 4.4. If this reasoning successfully blocks the implication that God's incarnating *only* in Jesus gives humans, as a group, decisive power over non-humans, then analogous reasoning allows us to block the implications about intra-human groups (men and women, etc.). But this doesn't help us with the worry that divine persons necessarily stand in a less-than-maximally-fair power asymmetry with any individual who is not divine. This requires discussing the Shared Power Presumption.

4.4 Against the Presumption

As mentioned above, the Power Argument may imply that God's creating non-divine individuals is necessarily less than maximally fair. If it is, I think it would be fine for God to do it anyway. Perhaps God will never do something less than maximally fair *without a sufficient reason*. But I think the good of created individuals distinct from God who can form relationships with God is a sufficient reason. Perhaps Hereth would reject this. Anyway, it also seems problematic, from the traditional Christian viewpoint, to think there is anything less than maximally fair *at all* about God's possessing decisive power over us. It is hard to imagine, say, a Biblical character expressing this sentiment and being vindicated for it, but easy to imagine it being expressed by Satan in *Paradise Lost*. Maintaining the view that it is not even *pro tanto* less than maximally fair for God to possess decisive power over us requires examining the Shared Power Presumption.

Hereth introduces the discussion of the principles of fair power distribution with "let's move away from God for a moment and talk about political philosophy" (186), and the discussion of Stella is a political example. So it may be helpful to look to political philosophy in considering why power imbalances are problematic. Hereth's claim is obviously not that the power imbalance is worrisome because God might *abuse* the power. It's instead that the mere power imbalance *itself* is problematic, regardless of how the power is exercised (if at all).

Hereth's most natural ally in political philosophy is the republican account of freedom defended by Philip Pettit (2012), Elizabeth Anderson (2017), and others. Republicanism focuses on an ideal of "freedom as non-domination," where "Someone, *A*, will be dominated in a certain choice by another agent or agency, *B*, to the extent that *B* has a power of interfering in the choice that is not controlled by *A*" (Pettit 2012, 50). Republicans seek a society where no one is dominated with respect to the exercise of their basic liberties (ch. 2). An important consequence of the republican account is that my freedom depends, not just on what I am actually able to do, but also on whether others *could* interfere with my actions with impunity, even if they are

disposed not to. A slave with an extremely permissive master may be able to do everything a free person does. But republicans view the slave as less than fully free, insofar as the slave is dominated. The master *could* interfere with impunity in the slave's exercise of their basic liberties, even if he actually doesn't.

There's an affinity between Hereth's notion of *B*'s having decisive power with respect to *X* and the republican notion of *B*'s dominating *A* with regard to a certain choice. Republicanism focuses on *freedom*, while Hereth focuses on *fairness*. But both accounts regard a certain kind of power imbalance as objectionable, even if it doesn't actually restrict an individual's options. Further, the republican account explains why Stella is problematic: the whites in Stella *could* abuse their power, though they don't. Finally, God could interfere with us with impunity, and so (it might seem) will necessarily dominate non-divine beings with respect to all their choices. This point has been noted by Guy Kahane (2018, 112–113), who, citing Pettit, treats republicanism as a reason to hope that God does not exist:

. . . liberty requires non-domination. It's not enough to have the negative liberty to pursue a wide enough range of opportunities. The slave of a benevolent master can have such a range of opportunities . . . It remains the case, however, that the master is in a position of domination vis-à-vis the slave. It's in his power to take away these options as he wills. . . . It should be obvious that we cannot fully possess such liberty if God exists—we are utterly dominated by Him.

I think republicanism provides part of an attractive model of how human communities should be governed (cf. Crummett 2020). But I'm skeptical about extending the model to divine/creature relationships. I think republicanism's appeal is driven by the intuition that there is something repugnant about subjection to the arbitrary whims of another, even when these whims are favorable to you. This is how Pettit himself (2012, 1–2) motivates the view:

. . . it takes only a little imagination to realize just how repellent this subjection can be. Think . . . of how you would feel as a student if you depended for not failing a course on the whim of an instructor. Or as a wife if you had to rely on the mood of your husband for whether you could enjoy an unmolested day. Or as a worker if you hung on the favour of a manager for whether you retained your job.

These examples are compelling but aren't analogous to God's situation. Since God is essentially morally perfect and wouldn't interfere with us without sufficient reason, it isn't right to say that our freedom depends upon God's "whim," "mood," or "favor." Even a perfectly virtuous human dictator would be relevantly different from God: they wouldn't be *essentially* perfect, so that we'd still depend on their contingent psychological makeup for our freedom. So I think our motivations for supporting socio-political republicanism don't provide even a *pro tanto* basis for objecting to the power imbalance between ourselves and God: this imbalance doesn't subject us to the arbitrary or contingent whims of another in the same way. And the same point applies

to Stella, and to the attraction of the Shared Power Presumption more broadly. If this is right, we lack good reason for thinking the Presumption applies to the relationship between created beings and God, and therefore lack good reason for thinking it provides even a *pro tanto* reason for God to not create beings distinct from Godself.

5. The Solidarity Argument

5.1 *The Argument*

Hereth (195–197) also provides what I will call the *Solidarity Argument*. Many Christian theologians have seen Christ’s suffering as an act of solidarity with suffering creatures. Some, such as Marilyn McCord Adams (2006), have even made this function of Christ’s suffering central to Christ’s role in reconciling God and creation. Hereth (196) suggests that to accomplish this expression of solidarity, “It’s not enough for God to become just anyone . . . a morally supreme God would come to identify particularly with the oppressed.” Hereth thinks this requires, not just that God incarnate as a member of *some oppressed group or other*, but that *each, particular* oppressed group contain a divine incarnation. Ze invokes the celebrated black liberation theologian James Cone (2010, 128) saying that God would “become a black person”:

The blackness of Christ clarifies the definition of him as the Incarnate One. In him God becomes oppressed humanity . . . By becoming a black person, God discloses that blackness is not what the world says it is. Blackness is a manifestation of the being of God in that it reveals that neither divinity nor humanity resides in white definitions but in liberation from captivity.

(I say more about Cone’s position, which I think Hereth misinterprets, in sec. 5.3.) Hereth (197) suggests that, to appropriately express solidarity with non-human animals, God similarly must incarnate as a non-human animal in order to share in the forms of oppression which they experience:

Were God to descend from heaven and incarnate as a 21st-century white, male, cisgender, heterosexual billionaire, it’s doubtful God would be fully partaking in our joys and sorrows . . . This is why, in the Christian tradition, Jesus didn’t incarnate as a Roman ruler or a child of an influential family. . . But the same is true of non-human animals. They are oppressed in ways most humans are not, and God displays a lack of solidarity with them unless God suffers as they suffer. This requires God to incarnate as a non-human animal. Just as the world needs not only a white savior but a black savior, so also the world needs not only a human savior but an animal savior.

5.2 Implications

Hereth's reasoning has at least two implications which conflict with orthodox Christianity. First, like the Power Argument, it requires a proliferation of incarnations, including among humans. Jesus was also not oppressed in the same way as women, disabled people, etc., so we will need, not only black and animal saviors, but also saviors for every particular oppressed group. I discussed previously why this conflicts with orthodox Christianity.

As long as there is some understanding of what it is to suffer or be in oppressed "in the same way as" someone which doesn't require *being* that person, the Solidarity Argument avoids implying that everyone must be divine. But it has another potentially problematic implication. In section two, I mentioned that dividing salvific work between Jesus and animal incarnations might detract from the cosmic significance Christianity has attributed to Jesus. But insofar as the expression of solidarity is made central to the *salvific work* of the incarnation, Hereth's position actually goes further, implying that Jesus's work was not sufficient even to save all humans. Paul writes that God was "in Christ, reconciling the world to himself" (2 Cor. 5:19), but on this view, it seems that Jesus was really only reconciling to God members of those social groups whose oppression is sufficiently similar to that experienced by Jesus. Indeed, on this view, Jesus would presumably only be the savior of a minority of Paul's audience, since the early Christian church included women, slaves, and others who experienced forms of oppression Jesus did not. Or consider that the Nicene Creed says of Jesus:

For us and for our salvation
 he came down from heaven:
 by the power of the Holy Spirit
 he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary,
 and was made man.
 For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
 he suffered death and was buried.

If Jesus is the savior of only a small portion of humanity, this claim is false; it applies to only a fraction of the people who recite the Creed.

5.3 Against the Argument

In responding, we should distinguish between two different questions conflated by Hereth's example of God incarnating as a "21st-century white, male, cisgender, heterosexual billionaire." One is whether, in order for an incarnation to serve as an adequate act of identification with oppressed individuals, God must incarnate as an oppressed individual (or at least an individual who suffers significantly in some way). This seems plausible: assuming that the billionaire has a pretty easy life overall, that incarnation doesn't seem meaningful as an act of solidarity with the oppressed or suffering. The other question is whether, in order to adequately express solidarity

with a particular suffering or oppressed individual, God must suffer and be oppressed *in the same way* as that individual, or whether it is enough that God suffer and be oppressed in some significant way or other. If the latter is the case, God's incarnation in Jesus could be enough to adequately express solidarity with the suffering and oppressed, including those who suffer or are oppressed in ways different than those experienced by Jesus. The billionaire example doesn't support one answer over the other, since the *obvious* problem with the billionaire is that he doesn't experience significant hardship at all, not that he doesn't experience hardship of a particular kind.

It seems to me that God could adequately express solidarity with the downtrodden through undergoing oppression and suffering even of a different type (cf. Clough 2013, ch.4 and Creegan 2013, 60), and by continuing to be spiritually present with those suffering even after incarnating on earth. Though Hereth cites James Cone, I think this is Cone's position, too. Cone's remarks about the need for a "black savior" *don't* imply that Jesus, the historical human being, was black, or that a separate black incarnation would be needed if he wasn't. Cone (2010, 130) writes:

But some whites will ask, "Does black theology believe that Jesus was *really* black?" *It seems to me that the literal color of Jesus is irrelevant* [emphasis added] . . . The importance of the concept of the black Christ is that it expresses the *concreteness* of Jesus's continued presence today. If we do not translate the first-century titles into symbols that are relevant today . . . Jesus becomes merely a figure of past history.

Cone's view has two parts. First, in a social context where black people are oppressed, Jesus the historical person is *symbolically* black insofar as, in undergoing Jesus's suffering, God can be identified with all oppressed people in their own individual contexts. Second, there is continued mystical identification: "the Risen Lord's identification with the suffering poor today is just as real as was his presence with the outcasts in first-century Palestine . . . like yesterday, today also he takes the pain of the poor upon himself and bears it for them," so that "His blackness is literal *in the sense that* he truly becomes One with the oppressed blacks, taking their suffering as his suffering" (1997, 124–125, emphasis added). Cone (1997, 123–124) even says that Jesus:

. . . *is* black because he *was* a Jew . . . the Jewishness of Jesus located him in the context of the Exodus, thereby connecting his appearance in Palestine with God's liberation of oppressed Israelites from Egypt . . . But on the other hand, the blackness of Jesus brings out the soteriological meaning of his Jewishness for our contemporary situation when Jesus's person is understood in the context of the cross and resurrection . . . The resurrection means that God's identity with the poor in Jesus is not limited to the particularity of his Jewishness but is applicable to all who fight on behalf of the liberation of humanity in this world.

Far from supporting Hereth's position, Cone's view seems to render additional incarnations unnecessary, at least for purposes of expressing solidarity.

Perhaps one could claim that it is still *better* for expressing solidarity that God take on every individual type of oppression or suffering through creaturely incarnation. But perhaps there is also something beautiful and appropriate about the idea that there should be a single creaturely life through which God identifies with all of us. For instance, we might think it unites individuals of diverse identities in a special way. And anyway, it isn't obvious that God must choose a *maximally* effective method of expressing solidarity, as opposed to one which is effective *enough* (recall the end of section three). In any event, for the Solidarity Argument to succeed, Hereth needs to show that this alternative understanding of solidarity is unsatisfactory, and ze provides no defense of this.

6. Eternality

6.1 The Preexistence View

I now turn to some of the details of Hereth's particular version of zootheism. Hereth argues that zootheism must be *eternally* true, so that there is always a non-human member of the Godhead. Hereth (199–200) distinguishes “three possible ways a divine person might incarnate as an animal and dwell among us on Earth” (199). The first is the *appearance* view, according to which God *appears* as an animal, but isn't really one. The second is the *transformation* view, according to which God assumes an animal nature upon incarnating, but was not previously an animal. The third is the *preexistence* view, according to which God is *eternally* an animal, even prior to incarnating. As Hereth puts it, “God . . . is, but never became, an animal” (200). Hereth defends the preexistence view, arguing that alternatives face ethical problems.

Against the appearance view, Hereth claims that “If God merely appears as one of us, then God doesn't share in our struggles and sufferings, and is therefore less than maximally sympathetic.” Further, ze claims that:

. . . if God merely appears as an animal without taking on their oppression, then God engages in a kind of “animalface”: a privileged individual deciding to pass as an oppressed individual. This is morally non-ideal, if not impermissible, and thus incompatible with the divine moral nature (199).

Accordingly, Hereth rejects the appearance view. My intention is to defend the transformation view against the pre-existence view, so I won't evaluate these arguments.

Hereth presents three arguments against the transformation view. One is parasitic upon the Power Argument: ze thinks power must be shared among groups at every time, so that “animal members must . . . share eternally in the Godhead's power” (189). Since I think the Power Argument fails, I'll set that aside. The second is that, even though on this view God really becomes a non-human animal, the decision to become one would still be improperly appropriative: “[If] God wasn't oppressed in morally similar ways to animals . . . by becoming an animal, God does something

morally inappropriate by appropriating animal suffering. God, as a person of privilege, takes on animal nature—yet another kind of animalface” (200). I will present Hereth’s third argument below, in section 6.4, so that there’s not too much space between my description of it and my criticism of it.

6.2 Implications

The preexistence view also conflicts with orthodox Christianity, for three reasons. First, it seems plausible that one cannot be an animal without having, or having had in the past, an animal body. If this is right, and if God has always been an animal, we appear committed to saying at least part of material reality has always existed, over and against the traditional claim that the material world was created by God a finite time ago. Second, the same reasoning which is supposed to entail the preexistence view regarding non-human animals would presumably also imply that, if the Son incarnated as Jesus, the Son must have always existed as a human with the social identity that Jesus had. If it would be problematically appropriative for God to become a non-human animal, the same would presumably be true of God becoming a Jewish man living under oppressive Roman government. But this is a troubling result for at least two reasons. First, it seems incompatible with how the incarnation is supposed to work: the Nicene Creed’s statement that the Son “became incarnate from the Virgin Mary and was made man” is false if the Son was always a man. Second, it may be metaphysically impossible for the Son to have always had Jesus’s social identity, conditional upon actual history. How could the Son have been a Jewish man living under oppressive Roman government in thirteen billion B.C., when there were no Jews, men, Romans, or oppressive governments?

Third, similar reasoning implies that the preexistence view with respect to non-human animals may be metaphysically impossible, conditional upon actual history. Presumably, the idea behind Hereth’s zootheism is not just that God incarnates as *some possible* type of non-human animal, but that God incarnates as (at least one of) the kinds of non-human animal that exists on earth, so as to express solidarity and share power with individuals of that type. However, it seems plausible that an essential part of species membership involves being part of a certain evolutionary lineage (cf. Okasha 2002). If we found creatures which were intrinsically identical to dogs on some other planet, I think these would not *really* be dogs, being genealogically unrelated to them; they would instead be intrinsically dog-like members of a different species. But then it isn’t clear that God *could* have been a member of any terrestrial animal species in, say, thirteen billion B.C., since (perhaps barring time travel or other odd possibilities) there could be no genealogical connection between an individual then and terrestrial animals. If theism entails the preexistence view, but the preexistence view is incompatible with natural history, then theism (and, *a fortiori*, Christianity) is falsified.

6.3 *The Appropriation Argument*

However, I reject Hereth's appropriation argument. Hereth anticipates the response that transformation is not really appropriative, since God *actually is* becoming a member of the relevant group. Ze responds:

It might be objected that God isn't appropriating animal oppression if God becomes an animal. But this is morally analogous to claiming that Rachel Dolezal wouldn't have appropriated black oppression if she had succeeded at becoming a black woman. At the very least, we should think there's something morally problematic about transforming our race or species as a means of identifying with the oppressed (205, fn. 25).

But surely whether Dolezal could actually become a black woman is relevant here, along with her motivations for wanting to do so. Consider a situation where I uncontroversially can join a group. Individuals of a certain foreign nationality are being oppressed. To protest this and to express solidarity with them, I become a citizen of that nation and am subsequently mistreated like other citizens of that nation. Whatever its merits, this isn't problematically appropriative. This especially seems right if I had some previous connection to the group—perhaps my spouse and children were members of the relevant nationality. But God's assuming an animal nature seems more analogous to this case than to Rachel Dolezal's. God unquestionably operates from a virtuous motive—expressing solidarity with non-human animals, as well as achieving whatever other goods an incarnation accomplishes. God unquestionably succeeds in becoming a member of the target group. And God has a pre-existing connection to non-human animals in virtue of being their loving creator. It doesn't seem that joining a group to express solidarity with them is problematic under the relevant conditions. Indeed, there are even times when adopting a marker of an oppressed group to express solidarity with them is generally considered okay, even *without* becoming a member of the group—such as when non-Muslim women in New Zealand were encouraged to wear headscarves to express solidarity with Muslims after the Christchurch mosque shooting (Australian Broadcasting Corporation 2019).

Furthermore, I think my judgment is backed by the leading *theories* of what's problematic about appropriation. The most popular account asserts that appropriation is problematic insofar as it constitutes or contributes to oppression. For instance, appropriating the cultural products of an oppressed group without compensation, and without having suffered as members of the group suffer, might be a wrongful form of exploitation. Or carelessly remixing the cultural products of a group might misrepresent their perspective and contribute to epistemic injustice (cf. Matthes 2019). But it doesn't seem that God's assuming an animal nature would be oppressive. For instance, God is not exploiting animals by incarnating; rather, it will presumably be a costly action on God's part. Indeed, if anything, it seems that assuming an animal nature would *counteract* the oppression of non-human animals by expressing solidarity with them and signaling God's love and concern for non-humans (cf. Crummett 2019).

Other accounts stress different factors (of course, many of these accounts are compatible: appropriation might be problematic for more than one reason). For instance, C. Thi Nguyen and Matthew Strohl (2019) focus on *group intimacy*. If my friends copied the practices specific to the relationship between myself and my partner—say, they began using the pet names we have for each other, or copied some little ritual we have—this would be invasive. The same might sometimes hold for copying practices specific to members of a certain group without permission. But again, it isn't clear that this condemns God's assuming an animal nature. Non-human animals *as a group* certainly don't stand in the relevant relationships of intimacy. Certain subsets may, but it isn't clear to me why they would, or should, be bothered by God's adopting their practices after incarnating as one of them. Of course, there are further accounts of the wrongness of appropriation, and I cannot discuss all of them here. But I take it that, at the very least, Hereth has not shown that any of them would condemn God's actions as understood by the transformation view.

6.4 *The Justice Argument*

Hereth provides a final argument from divine justice for pre-existence and against transformation. Ze claims that on the transformation view:

... God wasn't always sharing in animal life and struggles, and therefore wasn't always maximally an ally in their plight. It's better to sympathize with, fight for, and commiserate with the oppressed when they're first oppressed than to sympathize, fight, or commiserate with them later. And it's better not just in some generic sense, but with respect to justice. The longer God occupies a particular position of comparative privilege while the oppressed suffer under that privilege, the less just God is (200).

But it's possible to be an ally of a group, and to "sympathize with, fight for, and commiserate with" the members of a group, without being part of the group yourself. Presumably God will have been doing these things for everyone all along, regardless of when (if ever) God assumes a created nature. So this argument as stated appears unsuccessful.

Perhaps the thought is that the specific solidarity-expressing function of assuming a created nature is better performed earlier. Even if true, this wouldn't establish the eternality claim. Animals were first oppressed at a certain point in time. If God has incarnated as an animal, we have no independent reason to suppose it happened at one time rather than another. Perhaps God became an animal as soon as there were animals who were suffering or oppressed. This is compatible with the transformation view. And indeed, it's not clear that God's possessing an animal nature prior to incarnation—in, say, thirteen billion B.C.—would do any relevant work. If there was a divine individual with an animal nature in some unearthly realm at that point, presumably they weren't suffering or oppressed. (Who would be oppressing them?) So it's not clear that this would add anything to the expression of solidarity.

(Further, if God has been *eternally* suffering and oppressed, this might seem like overdoing solidarity.)

However, I claimed above that God's incarnating in Jesus would be *enough* to sufficiently express solidarity with all created beings, without *needing* additional incarnations. And God became incarnate in Jesus at a particular moment in time, long after suffering and oppression began. So perhaps the claim that earlier is better for solidarity threatens my claim about Jesus's sufficiency. Accordingly, I'll also note that "earlier is better" seems to me to be false. Suppose some group in my community has experienced a hate crime. I am "commiserating with, fighting for, and sympathizing with" them, but am also planning some particular event—a vigil, say—which will serve as a particularly impactful expression of solidarity with them. If I schedule this event at 8PM rather than 6PM, it doesn't seem to me that this must make it less effective as an expression of solidarity, much less must make me less than fully just. This seems particularly clear if there is some good reason for the delay. And perhaps there were good reasons for the incarnation to happen when it did. Perhaps it is good that humans be responsible for preserving and propagating the record of the incarnation (cf. Crummett 2015). But if God had become incarnate in pre-history, there would be no realistic way for this record to be preserved. Or perhaps there is something fitting about God's incarnation coming as the culmination of the historically-enacted salvation narrative described in the Old Testament. But of course this would take time. My own sense is that, given that God can be "sympathizing with, fighting for, and commiserating with" the suffering and oppressed even prior to assuming a created nature, reasons like this to delay doing so need not be very strong in order to justify the delay.

7. The Number of Divine Persons

Hereth (191–192) also argues that zootheism provides⁸ "reason to prefer either a social monotheist or polytheist variant of zootheism over a strict monotheist view." ("Social monotheism" claims there are "multiple divine individuals who jointly constitute God and who instantiate the relevant, perfect-making properties" (ibid.); social trinitarianism is one example.) Hereth claims there must be multiple divine persons because a single divine person could not be part of all the needed social groups without contradiction:

... strict monotheism can't accommodate the various identities that the Power Argument supports. Because the Power Argument supports not only the inclusion of non-human animals within the Godhead, but also disabled individuals, people of color, queer individuals, women, etc., it supports invariably many identities within the Godhead. This raises the worry that no single individual can instantiate all of these identities, or at least not at once.

⁸ Hereth (191–192) also endorses Richard of St. Victor's love-based argument for trinitarianism and against strict monotheism. Since this argument has no *special* connection to zootheism, and does not imply the existence of more than three divine persons, I will focus on Hereth's other argument here.

For any divine individual G and time t , either G is disabled at t or G isn't disabled at t ; and if G isn't disabled at t , then non-disabled individuals have decisive power over disabled individuals at t , which is less than perfectly just (192).

Though Hereth doesn't draw out the implication, this argument seems incompatible with Christian trinitarianism. Similar reasoning would apparently suggest, not only that there must be *multiple* divine persons, but also that there must be *more than three* divine persons.

I'll say two things. First, I argued earlier that Hereth's arguments for the necessity of there being very many simultaneous incarnations fail. So I don't think Hereth has shown that there must be more than three simultaneous incarnations. Second, the so-called "fundamental problem of Christology" (Cross 2011, 453) concerns how even one incarnation could be possible, given that being divine seems to essentially include possessing properties which contradict properties essential to being human. (E.g., one might think God is essentially uncreated, while humans are essentially (at least possibly) created). Hereth's argument closely mirrors the "fundamental problem." Hereth worries that a divine person's simultaneously assuming two different created natures requires instantiating incompatible properties because the created natures possess contradictory properties; the fundamental problem worries that a divine person's assuming even one created nature requires instantiating incompatible properties, because a divine nature and any created nature possess contradictory properties. And indeed, Tim Pawl (2019, 55–67), though not responding to Hereth, considers what is essentially Hereth's objection to multiple simultaneous incarnations, writing that it represents "a resurrection of an old enemy... sometimes referred to as the Fundamental Problem" (55).

So the natural question is whether the correct solution to the "fundamental problem" also defuses Hereth's argument. Pawl thinks it does. In response to the fundamental problem, Pawl (2016, ch. 7; 2019, 64–67) defends the view that we should "understand the truth conditions for the pairs of allegedly inconsistent predicates to have a tacit 'has a nature that is' preface" (2019, 64). It isn't contradictory to say that the Son *has a nature that is* essentially uncreated while also possessing a (different) nature that is created. If this works, then, as Pawl argues (64–67), it also solves Hereth's objection. There will similarly be no contradiction in saying that the Son has a created nature that is disabled at t and that he has a different created nature which isn't disabled at t . But suppose Pawl's solution fails. If zootheism is true, then incarnation is possible, so there must be *some* solution to the fundamental problem. This other solution may well also solve the problem Hereth raises. So Hereth must defend the view that there is a solution to the fundamental problem, but also that this solution cannot be applied to the problem he raises for multiple simultaneous incarnations. I don't see good reason to accept this. So I am happy to leave open the possibility that there have been more than three simultaneous divine incarnations, but I don't think this is a problem for

trinitarianism, since I don't see good reason to deny that one divine person might simultaneously undergo multiple incarnations.⁹

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