

Reflections on the Hypostatic Union: How Can a Single Person Have Two Intellects and Wills?



One of the most difficult concepts for students of theology to get their heads around is the orthodox doctrine of the incarnation. Students generally are willing to affirm that Jesus Christ is a single person (against Nestorianism), that he is “God become a human being” and not a human being in whom God was especially present (against adoptionism), that he is fully God and fully human (Chalcedon); however, I have found that concerns arise when some of the affirmations of the later Councils are discussed. Affirmations of ditheletism (that Christ has two intellect and wills, one human and one divine) and *anhypostasia* (that because Christ is a single divine person, he has no distinct human person) create puzzlement. In an email conversation with a well-known contemporary Evangelical theologian, I was once told that the notion that Jesus had both a divine intellect and will and a human intellect and will sounded like “Nestorianism.” More recently, a student complained that saying that Jesus was not a human person sounded like

Apollinarianism. A student sent me an email awhile back, raising some of these questions, and I have belatedly responded:

I'm still stuck on the single personhood of Christ in the face of two natures. I understand the distinction (the who vs. the what) and the necessity to keep either from being diminished/replaced by the other. But I'm struggling with how to understand someone with two wills, two knowledges, two ontologies, as a single anything. I know at some point we plead mystery, but I want to get as close as I can before I do.

Concerning personhood, I think the following is necessary:

- a) A person is absolutely unique. There are many human beings, but there is only one unique Bill Witt or D___ S___ (name omitted).
- b) A person is consciously aware, and the source of his or her own actions.
- c) A person knows and wills and, on that basis, is able to act in a responsible manner.
- d) A person is relational – specifically a person is in relation to other persons as I and you.
- e) For all of the above reasons, a person is a “some one” rather than a “some thing.”

Where things get confusing for us is that in the only cases of personhood of which we have immediate experience (that of fellow human beings), every person is an embodied individual with a single intellect and will. If there is more than one intellect and will, there is more than one person.

However, in the case of the Trinity and the incarnation, this become problematic. The orthodox doctrine of the Trinity is

that there are three persons, but one nature and not three intellects and three wills, but a single intellect and will. The three persons of the Trinity all know, will, and love with one divine intellect and will. The Augustinian and Thomist "psychological" Trinitarian model goes so far as to equate the Son/Word with the divine Wisdom (Intellect) and the Spirit with divine Love (will). Karl Barth and Karl Rahner were so concerned that speaking of three divine "persons" might lead to a conception of three separate knowing and willing "individuals" that they preferred to speak of the Trinitarian persons as "modes of being." However, the more recent consensus seems to be that the traditional language is still preferable because Barth's and Rahner's position does not adequately enough distinguish the Trinitarian persons as individual centers of relational consciousness and loving. God really is three distinct persons (not one), but the three persons know and love one another with the same undivided intellect and will.

In the case of the Son, the orthodox position is that the Son is a single Divine Person; however, as human, it is necessary to speak of this divine person as knowing and willing with a human (not divine) intellect and will. Within the sphere of the incarnation, God the Son (a distinct divine person) knows and acts as a human being, and that necessarily involves a human intellect and will. If the puzzle concerning the Trinity is how three persons can share a single intellect and will, the puzzle concerning the incarnate Son is how a single person can have two intellects and two wills.

The best thinkers on this issue are in agreement that the fundamental distinction that enabled patristic trinitarian and incarnational theology to move forward was the distinction between person and nature. As long as the location of union continued to be "natures," then either monophysitism/Apollinarianism or adoptionism/Nestorianism were inevitable. If one focuses on union, and assumes that the

divine nature is at the center of the union between Christ's deity and humanity, then the humanity must yield to the divinity, and Jesus is not genuinely human. On the other hand, if one focuses on the distinctiveness of the natures, and insists that they must each maintain their own integrity, then the question arises of how Christ is genuinely one, and not simply a human being who has a special relationship with God. What the distinction between person and natures enables is to make it clear that the incarnate Christ's center of identity is that of the Second member of the Trinity. Who is Jesus Christ? He is God incarnate. At the same time, in order to maintain the integrity of both deity and humanity in the incarnation, it must be clear that both natures are complete – Jesus Christ is completely human and completely divine. What is the incarnate Jesus Christ? He is a man, but he is also God.

It is this distinction between person and nature that leads inevitably to the distinction between person (which is divine) and intellect and will (which, are respectively, divine in the divine nature, and human in the human nature). Either Apollinarianism or Nestorianism would be easier to understand. If Jesus is a single divine person with a single divine intellect and will (Apollinarianism), that fits within our known categories, but it means that Jesus is not genuinely human. If Jesus's genuinely human intellect and will mean that Jesus is a human person, then the question arises, how is he genuinely God, and not simply another example of a prophet or a saint?

I think the following might be at least semi-helpful in terms of providing some clarification, but without making things any easier to conceive (fit our heads around).

In the five distinctives of personhood above – (a), (d), and (e) point to characteristics of the person's distinctiveness – what distinguishes one person from another; (b) and (c) point not to characteristics of the person's identity in itself, but

to activities of the person. The person "is aware," "acts," "knows," "wills," "is responsible." In each case, it is possible to distinguish the person as the source of activity from the activity itself. It is the person who knows, acts, wills, and loves. The intellect and will do not know, will, and love; rather the person knows and loves using an intellect and will. A person is inseparable from an intellect and will, but is not simply identified with them. The person is the source of the action (the someone), but is not simply identified with the action.

In the case of the incarnation, a divine person, who, as one of the members of the Trinity, is the source of divine actions using the divine intellect and will, now has assumed a human nature, that is, the humanity of a single human individual. Within the sphere of the incarnation, the second person of the Trinity now takes on an additional role; the person of the Word (the center of identity in the sense of a), d), and e) becomes the source of activity of the human Jesus, but in this case, this same divine person exercises actions b) and c) through a human intellect and will. That is, the divine person of the Word (the "who" of Jesus) in the sense of a), d), and e), genuinely lives as a human being and so is conscious, is the source of human actions, knows, wills, loves, and is responsible in a completely human manner.

This, I think, is as far as the ecumenical councils got. They did not really address the question you ask: "how to understand someone with two wills, two knowledges, two ontologies, as a single anything?" I'm hoping that perhaps some of what I've written addresses that. The single unique center of identity who is the Word of God and who knows, wills, and acts, does so in two different ways, both as human and divine. The incarnate Word is not a "single anything," he is two "anythings," one divine, one human. At the same time, he is a single "anyone." He is the same distinct, knowing, willing, responsible individual exercising his personal

activities of knowing, willing, acting within two different spheres of activity, one divine, one human.

I also addressed some of this awhile ago in an essay I wrote on [Cyril of Alexandria](#), and I'll include some of that below:

The uniqueness of the second person of the Trinity's access to the consciousness of the incarnate Jesus lies in personal identity. Or rather, the second person of the Trinity does not simply have access to the mind of Jesus. He is Jesus. The person of the Word takes the place of what would be a human person in the incarnate Word, and that person is the center of the human consciousness and will of the incarnate Word. It is not the human mind that knows or the human will that wills, but the divine person who knows using the human mind, and the divine person who wills using the human will. Because it is the person who acts, knows, and wills, the person of the Word knows himself (and not someone else) to be acting, knowing, and willing in the actions of Jesus.

But because there are two natures (with two minds and wills), the same person acting as the one center of consciousness experiences himself in two different ways (as human and as divine) in two consciousnesses. As divine (in his divine mind), the knowledge of the Word must encompass both the contents of his divine and human minds (because the divine mind is omniscient). As human (in his human mind), the same person of the Word knows only the contents of his human mind—because the two natures do not lose their personal integrity, and because it is not the nature of human minds to be omniscient.

At the same time, we must insist that the limitations of the person of the Word incarnate are not limitations on the Word in his divine nature as such. The divine nature neither changes, grows, or diminishes in the incarnation. Rather, through entering into a new relation to the humanity he has assumed, the Word begins a new mode of existence, in which he

experiences the limitations of a genuine human life. The limitations are those inherent to human nature as such. They are not limitations of deity.

Finally, it is important to recognize . . . that the humanity of the incarnate Christ is permanent. The incarnation is not a temporary measure in which the Eternal Word starts out being God, ceases to be God for awhile and becomes human, and then (after his resurrection) becomes God again. Rather, in the incarnation, the Word undergoes a permanent kenosis, in which he makes our humanity personally his own, and retains it for eternity, both lowering himself to experience personally the smallness of our humanity, but also elevating that humanity which becomes his forever. It is through the mediation of that permanently assumed humanity that we come to share in the communion of the Triune life, that is always the grounds of our own access to God the Father, through the Son in the unity of the Spirit.