

Beall on Contradictory Christology
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The fundamental problem of Christology is to explain how we might reconcile the contradictions apparently implied by the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation. According to that doctrine, for example, Jesus is mutable (in virtue of his human nature) and Jesus is immutable (in virtue of his divine nature). Since contradictions are typically treated as problematic, most theologians have opted to demonstrate that the apparent contradiction (i.e. a paradox) is not really a contradiction. In his forthcoming paper on contradictory Christology, JC Beall argues that an alternative response to the apparent contradiction is to deny that it is merely apparent. In other words, Beall argues that one reasonable response to the fundamental problem of Christology is to claim that there are at least some *true contradictions*; namely, those concerning the relationship between the human and divine natures in the Incarnation.

What is your initial response to this proposal? – No argument has been given yet, so make sure that as we proceed we remain attentive to our own confirmation biases concerning whether we should endorse or reject Beall's proposal.

In what follows, I seek to explain and appraise Beall's main thesis in as brief a fashion as possible. To achieve this, I begin by considering a familiar logical paradox (i.e. the Liar Paradox) and survey possible responses to that paradox that one might take. After this, I show that as Beall thinks about Christology, the possible responses to the fundamental problem of Christology are analogous to the possible responses to the Liar.

The Liar Paradox

Consider the following moment of logical brilliance from the Apostle Paul in Titus 1:12:

One of Crete's own prophets has said it: "Cretans are always liars..."

Now ask yourself whether what the prophet (Epimenides) said was true. If it was true, then everything said by a Cretan would be a lie. But lies are falsehoods. And so, if the prophet speaks truly, then Cretans always tell falsehoods. But here's the catch. The prophet is himself a Cretan! So, if what he says is true, then because he's also a Cretan, it must also be false. So, if what he says is true, then it's false. This verse, when (naively) taken literally, is a concrete example of a liar paradox. But let us consider a formalized version of the liar paradox; namely, the sentence I hereby dub ' p ':

(p) p is false.

Consider p . Is it true or is it false?

Suppose p is true. If so, then the content of p is true (i.e. it matches up with reality). But the content of p asserts ' p is false'. So, if p is true, then it follows that p is false. Contradiction! (Pause: make sure you understand this proof...it's full-proof).

Suppose p is false. If so, then the content of p is false (i.e. the negation of p matches reality). But, if we negate p 's content (i.e. stick a 'not' in front of it), then this results in us saying that it is *not* the case that p is false. But we started by assuming p was false, and then derived the claim that p was *not* false. So, if p is false, then p is not false. Contradiction! (Pause).

Both options, supposing p to be true & supposing p to be false, lead to a contradiction. What are we to make of this? Well, Classical Logic requires that all *declarative* sentences be one of the following: true or false (and notice p is declarative if anything is). Classical Logic also prohibits any sentence from being *both* true and false. So, it looks like Classical Logic cannot give us an answer concerning what the truth-value of the Liar sentence is. Does this spell doom for Classical Logic?

The short answer is this: not necessarily. If you want to save Classical Logic, you'll need some reason to deny that liar sentences are the sorts of sentences it's meant to deal with in the first place. Here are some options: (1) Not all sentences are true or false. For instance, "please pass the salt" and "What's the average windspeed velocity of a swallow?" resist analysis in terms of truth or falsity. That is, if you ask the question, *is "Please pass the salt" true?*, then you've misunderstood the very meaning of that sentence. So, a Classical Logician could say that liar sentences are like that. Even though they *appear* to be declarative sentences (and thus capable of being true or false), they really aren't. Another option is this: (2) Someone might modify the types of sentences Classical Logic deals with slightly by saying that it doesn't govern *all* declarative sentences, but rather, just those declarative sentences that don't involve the property of *self-reference*. This is a pretty heroic move, though, since it means Classical Logic can't account for our formalized liar, p (which refers to itself, a sentence), or everyday liars like Paul's quotation of the Cretan prophet (which refers to a person who's a liar, rather than a sentence).¹ (3) We might say that p is true (false) in one sense when we assess it, but that p asserts a different sort of truth (falsity)

¹ As it turns out, this won't work by itself anyway since we can get rid of self-reference in the sentence. Have it refer to another sentence q and have q refer to p . The problem will resurface. Plus, in light of the Cretan example, you might wonder if self-reference to sentences is different from reference to ethnicity. Guarding Classical Logic from the latter by this strategy seems...well...odd.

about itself. If we do this, then we get something like: if p is True₁, then p is False₂. And if p is False₁, then p is True₂. Such a move is a variation on something like the following:

Red – Red is not-Red

Is **Red** true or false? If you look at the color of the word ‘Red’ in ‘not-Red’, it is obvious that the sentence is true, and nothing contradictory follows from its truth. If you sub in Truth₁ for ‘Red’ and Truth₂ for ‘Red’, we have a formally parallel case. No contradiction follows whatsoever since ‘Truth₁’ and ‘Truth₂’ refer to different properties just as ‘Red’ and ‘Red’ refer to different shades of red. (Pause: is there a way to make sense of this move for truth the way we make sense of the move for red?)

Maybe you’d prefer to give up Classical Logic, though. Here are some moves for you. (4) Someone might think that certain features of p (e.g. self-reference) give it a new *type* of truth-value: *neither true nor false* (i.e. p is gappy).² The difficulty for this approach will be to justify the introduction of the third truth-value.³ (5) Yet another option, however, is to claim that p is *both* true *and* false (i.e. p is glutty). What’s important for such a glutty approach to the liar, however, is to motivate *why* we should treat p as contradictory (since it’s always surprising to find true contradictions...there aren’t many cases of them and the least controversial ones are linguistic). But not only must the glut-theorist motivate the contradiction, they must also deny *ex falso quodlibet* (the principle of explosion) so that liar sentences don’t render every theory with a truth-predicate or self-reference *trivial*. (Recall the proof of any sentence from a contradiction on the other handout).

Can you think of examples of gappy sentences? What about the reality they describe makes them gappy? How about glutty sentences? What about the reality they describe makes them glutty?

Contradictory Christology

(JC) Jesus is mutable and Jesus is immutable.

JC is apparently contradictory and perhaps also *actually* contradictory. How might we maintain Classical Logic in face of JC? Since actual contradictions of any sort are impermissible according to Classical Logic, someone attempting to preserve this logic (1) might deny that Jesus is mutable *in the same sense that* Jesus is immutable. This move is easier to imagine with respect to other attributes, such as omniscience. Some philosophical theologians, for instance, argue for a Two-Minds Christology where we suppose that Jesus was possessed of both a divine and a human mind. Then, to say that Jesus is not omniscient is merely to say that Jesus’ human mind does not know (or contain) all true propositions. Moreover, to say Jesus is omniscient implies just that his divine mind knows (contains) all true propositions. Then, given that the human and divine mind can be separated in certain ways, the paradoxicality of this modified version of JC dissipates.⁴ Presumably, a parallel case could be constructed to handle an attribute such as (im)mutability. (2) Another option might be to deny that the creedal language captures *metaphysical* truth about Jesus and restrict classical logic to application for metaphysical reality rather than theological language. The idea, then, is that these predicates (i.e. mutable & immutable) are only *analogous* to divine reality (i.e. a reality which doesn’t admit of contradiction), and thus, the predicates are only contradictory *within language* and reflect the limits of human cognition.⁵

But suppose we aren’t enamored with Classical Logic anyway. Then, yet another option (3) is to claim that JC is gappy. It’s neither true nor false. This option seems to be merely theoretical, however, since we ought to at least count claims like JC as true *on pain of heresy*. And if JC is *neither true nor false*, then it at least follows that JC is also *not true*. But now, for Beall’s preferred option (4): JC is a true contradiction; that is, it’s a prime example of a glutty proposition. Recall, however, what is important for such a move as found in the liar paradox. Because of the rarity of true contradictions (especially ones that are language-independent), claiming that a contradiction is true requires impressive motivation (i.e. you can’t just say, “Thank God we’re doing theology since it’s just obvious to all of us, church Fathers included, that theology is mysterious and, therefore, glutty.” The relevance of the folk wisdom, “there ain’t no such thing as a free lunch” strikes me as making a similar point). Moreover, in addition to denying *ex falso quodlibet*, a complete theological theory will need to carefully delineate what still follows from such true contradictions. Necessary truths (e.g. $p \rightarrow p$), for instance, ought to follow from true contradictions even if we cannot use such contradictions to prove just anything by *reductio ad absurdum* (via the principle of explosion). As a result, Beall hasn’t developed a complete contradictory Christology. Rather, he has gestured at the way in which such a Christology might be coherently developed. Perhaps in our discussion we’ll work out what shape or form such a glutty Christology might take.

² (4) is a different strategy from (1) since (4) claims that ‘neither true nor false’ is a *truth-value*. (1) can’t say this insofar as its beholden to Classical Logic.

³ Here’s one way this has been done in another context: “The current king of France is bald” seems like a true or false statement if anything is. However, some philosophers have argued that it is ill-formed because it assumes falsely that there is a current king of France, and therefore, is neither true nor false. So, someone might argue that *liar sentences* assumes something which is false, and thus, is neither true nor false.

⁴ I’m not advocating this approach of such people as Swinburne or T. V. Morris to Christology. It’s merely a clear and useful illustration.

⁵ Notice that both of these options are *consistent* with everything Beall has to say. E.g. In the latter case it might turn out that theological logic is glutty but that metaphysical reality and God’s nature (i.e. as God is in Godself) are governed by Classical Logic nevertheless.