Part III: Philosophical Arguments Regarding Divine Embodiment

David L. Paulsen

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol35/iss4/5
The Small Crucifixion, by Matthias Grünewald (ca. 1470–1528). Oil on panel, 24 1/8” x 18 1/8”, 1511–1520. Samuel H. Kress Collection, © Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C. Few artists in the European tradition have communicated the agonies of corporeality more powerfully than Grünewald’s depictions of the crucifixion of Christ. The wounds from the crown of thorns and the lashing are prominent. The cross is expressively bowed from the twisted distortions of the hands and feet that emotionally express Christ’s agony and the actuality of the sacrifice. The dark background emphasizes Christ’s bleakness and loneliness, and the body is the receptor for Christ’s pain and suffering.
Part III

Philosophical Arguments Regarding Divine Embodiment

*Philosophical arguments purporting to prove that the concept of an embodied God is incoherent are themselves logically uncompelling.*

Though the earliest Christians believed God to be embodied, thinkers within the classical Christian tradition have for centuries reasoned that on logical grounds God must be incorporeal—without body or parts.²⁰⁸ In this final section, I meet these thinkers on their own terms, apart from the historical arguments of the preceding two sections. I examine the most common rational arguments against divine embodiment and show that none of them is sufficient to prove God’s incorporeality. Hence, no such argument ought be a stumbling block to rational acceptance of the Father and the Son as embodied persons.

The pattern of reasoning that these philosophical arguments typically follow was set out by Anselm as early as the eleventh century.²⁰⁹ Anselm defines God as “that than which none greater can be conceived.” From this general definition, he deduces not only that God exists (by means of his famous ontological argument), but also what God is like. In particular, he argues that “x is the greatest conceivable being” logically entails “x is incorporeal.” It will be helpful to outline his position in some detail, before using it as the main representative of the arguments refuted below.

²⁰⁸Many Christians nonetheless affirm that God (the Son) was incarnate in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, was crucified and raised from the dead, and exists now everlasting with a resurrected (though gloriously transformed) body. These views apparently conflict, for if God must be incorporeal, then the resurrected Christ cannot be God. The problem can be expressed in terms of an inconsistent triad: (1) Jesus of Nazareth exists everlasting with a resurrected body; (2) Jesus of Nazareth is God; and (3) N (if x is God, then x is incorporeal). The conjunction of any two propositions of the triad entails the negation of the third. In this section, I argue that (3) is false. If my argument is successful, it removes possible stumbling blocks to rational acceptance of both the Incarnation and the Resurrection.

In defining the term "greatest conceivable being," Anselm makes it clear that by *conceivable* he does not mean psychologically imaginable—otherwise, God's greatness would not exceed the limits of human thought. Rather, by "greatest conceivable being," he means a being than which no greater being is logically possible.

As to what he means by *greatest*, Anselm explains that the greatest conceivable being would lack nothing that is good and would be whatever it is better to be than not to be. Contemporary commentators have plausibly suggested that in this context, the value terms (*greatest, good, and better*) are best understood as signifying religious values. According to this view, when Anselm refers to "the greatest conceivable being," he means "that than which a no more worthy of worship is logically possible." The formula is often shortened to "the most worthy object of religious worship" or "the most adequate object of religious attitudes." I will take these shortened formulae to be equivalent to that stated by Anselm. This bit of analysis provides the backdrop for six separate arguments for divine incorporeality, which I will now examine.

**The Argument from Divine Infinity**

From the formula "x is the greatest conceivable being," Anselm first derives "x cannot be limited in any way." As a rationale for Anselm's conclusion, J. N. Findlay argues that it is

wholly anomalous to worship anything *limited* in any thinkable manner. For all limited superiorities are tainted with an obvious relativity, and can be dwarfed in thought by still mightier superiorities, in which process of being dwarfed they lose their claim upon our worshipful attitudes. And hence we are led on irresistibly to demand that our religious object . . . should tower *infinitely* above all other objects.²¹⁰

From the inference that God cannot be limited in any way, Anselm concludes that God cannot be corporeal. He argues:

> But everything that is in any way bounded by place . . . is less than that which no law of place . . . limits. Since, then, nothing is greater than thou, no place . . . contains thee; but thou art everywhere . . .

For altogether circumscribed is that which, when it is wholly in one place, cannot at the same time be in another. And this is seen to be true of corporeal things alone. But uncircumscribed is that which is, as whole, at the same time everywhere. And this is understood to be true of thee alone. 21

Anselm’s argument can be summarized as follows:

1. God = the most worthy object of religious worship.
2. The most worthy object of religious worship cannot be limited in any way.
3. If God were corporeal, he would be limited in that he could not be, as a whole, at the same time everywhere.
4. Hence, God cannot be corporeal. (1) (2) (3)

As a first objection to premise 2, if it is understood literally, Anselm himself cannot consistently affirm it. For if God were absolutely unlimited, he would have to be the whole of reality and thereby not the Creator-God of theistic theology who is ontologically distinct from his creations and who gives his creatures some measure of independence from himself. It is the existence of the Creator-God, I take it, that Anselm is attempting to prove. Similarly, if God were not limited in any way, God could not possess any determinate attributes, either positive or negative. For example, if God were immutable he would be limited in that he could not be mutable or if he were atemporal he would be limited in that he could not be temporal. Indeed, Findlay suggests that an absolutely unlimited being may well entail “a deific absence of anything definite.” But Anselm employs his deity-formula to generate some eighteen divine attributes.

Findlay’s assertion that it is absolutely anomalous to worship a being limited in any thinkable manner seems to imply mistakenly that a limitation, as limitation, is thereby a defect. But surely this assertion depends on the nature of the limitation. Obviously, a limitation in something that is not admirable, such as ignorance, selfishness, or cruelty, would be a good thing. Anselm makes it clear that the greatest possible being would be absolutely unlimited only in every admirable or great-making attribute. But even here we have long recognized that it is possible to have too much of a good

21 Deane, Basic Writings, 19–20.
thing. A virtue taken to excess may become a tragic flaw. One may be too trusting, too generous, or too helpful. Limitations, as limitations, are value neutral. Moreover, not all values—especially in their superlative form—are logically compossible, such as unlimited compassion and unlimited bliss.\(^{212}\) Nor do all great-making properties or perfections admit of completion. For example, the virtue of veracity admits of completion, but an attribute such as creativity does not. Thus divine perfection cannot coherently be understood as being complete in all respects.

No doubt what Anselm meant, or should have meant, then, is 2': the most worthy object of religious worship must be unlimited in every respect in which to be so (a) is possible, (b) is admirable, and, when conjoined with other excellences, (c) maximizes worship worthiness. (Hereafter, I shall use \(WWM\), short for worship worthy maximizing, to denote conditions [b] and [c].) But if in Anselm’s argument one replaces premise 2 with 2', the argument is no longer valid.

The Argument from Divine Omnipotence

Now, in order to try to make Anselm’s argument work, I shall have to supply some additional premise(s). More specifically, I will need to show some particular respect in which God must be absolutely unlimited that is both possible and \(WWM\) and, at the same time, incompatible with his being corporeal. It may seem that unlimited power or omnipotence would satisfy these conditions; that is, it may seem that the following proposition is true:

5. It is both possible and \(WWM\) to be absolutely unlimited in power.

Using 5, one can construct the following argument for divine incorporeality:

1. God = the most worthy object of religious worship.

2'. The most worthy object of religious worship must be absolutely unlimited in every respect in which it is both possible and \(WWM\) to be so.

5. It is both possible and \(WWM\) to be absolutely unlimited in power.

6. N (if x is corporeal, then x is not absolutely unlimited in power.)
7. Hence, God cannot be corporeal.

The symbol N signifies a purported necessary truth.

I must now consider whether premise 5 is true. And the first question I must ask is, Is it possible for God to be omnipotent in the sense of having absolutely unlimited power? The answer is clearly negative. Indeed, the logical paradoxes generated by the notion of absolutely unlimited power are well known. For example, the notion seemingly entails the incoherent conclusions that God could create a stone so large that he could not move it or that he could simultaneously create both an irresistible cannonball and an unbreakable lamppost. To salvage a rationally coherent view of God, thinkers have been compelled to opt for definitions of omnipotence considerably more restricted than its etymology would suggest. Recently, for example, Anthony Kenny has proposed that omnipotence be understood as “the possession of all logically possible powers which it is logically possible for a being with the attributes of God to possess,” where “attributes” refers to “those properties of Godhead which are not themselves powers.”

Given Kenny’s proposal, how can the attributes that God possesses be determined? If these are to be determined by Christian revelation and if this revelation confirms that God the Son has a resurrected body, then omnipotence must be understood in terms of the logically possible powers that are also logically possible for an embodied God to have. So understood, there would be no conflict between divine power and divine embodiment.

If, on the other hand, the divine attributes must be ascertained by reasoning from Anselm’s formula, one must ask: (1) how much power must the most worthy object of religious worship possess? and (2) could an embodied being coherently possess that much power?

---

213 For further explication of the problems with absolutely unlimited power, see Kent E. Robson, “Omnipotence, Omnipresence, and Omniscience in Mormon Theology,” in Bergera, Line upon Line, 67–75.
When we consider the first question, it seems evident that from a religious point of view, the matter of God's power relates to our practical needs for individual help, protection, and preservation. We look to God for forgiveness of our sins and for power to repent; for strength to cope with and to be refined by our adversities; for comfort in our trials; and above all, for salvation and eternal life. We trust that God's power is sufficient to satisfy these needs and expectations and to fulfill all his purposes and promises. For this to be assured, it seems as if God must be supreme and have power over all things so that no one or no thing can thwart the fulfillment of his will.

The term *almighty* can be used to refer to the power described, which is how the third *Lecture on Faith* describes God's omnipotence. This lecture delineates God's character as described in revelation and then explains why this character is necessary for the object of religious faith. Of omnipotence, it says:

An acquaintance with these attributes in the divine character, is essentially necessary, in order that the faith of any rational being can center in him for life and salvation. For if he did not, in the first instance, believe him to be God, that is, the creator and upholder of all things, he could not center his faith in him for life and salvation, for fear there should be a greater than he who would thwart all his plans, and he like the gods of the heathen, would be unable to fulfill his promises; but seeing he is God over all, from everlasting to everlasting, the creator and upholder of all things, no fear can exist in the minds of those who put their trust in him, so that in this respect their faith can be without wavering. (3:19; italics in original)

If I grant—and it seems I must, at least from the perspective of the ordinary believer—that in order to be the most worthy object of religious worship it is necessary that God be almighty, must I also grant that his power is sufficient? It seems so. God's worship worthiness connects most essentially with his personal and moral attributes: holiness, loving kindness, compassion, long-suffering, justice, equity, and veracity. These attributes are faithfully and steadfastly expressed in his personal dealings and relations with us as father, creator, savior, exemplar, and friend. His power is also relevant but only to the extent that it is needful to accomplish those ends that he, as a perfectly loving and righteous father, freely chooses. To suppose otherwise is to affirm that power itself has something worship worthy about it, quite apart
from the good ends it makes possible. That some may, in fact, value or even worship power for its own sake, I don’t doubt. But such worship is neither religiously nor morally required.

If my reasoning is correct, then, it is neither possible nor \( w \in M \) for God to be absolutely unlimited in power, and thus proposition 5 is false. But my analysis also supplies the following more satisfactory alternative to 5:

5'. The most worthy object of religious worship must be almighty.

Next, to make Anselm’s argument work, one must also show:

8. \( N \) (If \( x \) is corporeal, then \( x \) is not almighty.)

But the truth of 8 is by no means self-evident. Some further premise(s) must be supplied to show why a corporeal being cannot be almighty. Anselm’s argument suggests a possible connecting link—that is, his argument suggests that if God is almighty, he must be omnipresent and that if he were omnipresent, he could not be corporeal. With these claims, I can again reconstruct Anselm’s argument.

The Argument from Divine Omnipresence

The argument can now be stated as follows:

1. God = the most worthy object of religious worship.
2. 5'. The most worthy object of religious worship must be almighty.
3. 9. \( N \) (If \( x \) is almighty, then \( x \) is omnipresent).
4. 10. \( N \) (If \( x \) is omnipresent, then \( x \) is not corporeal).
5. 11. Hence, God cannot be corporeal.

To properly evaluate this argument, one must understand more clearly what is meant by the claim that God must be omnipresent. Anselm suggests that if God is omnipresent, then he is present, as a whole, at the same time everywhere. This notion is less puzzling when considered in its religious setting. Perhaps the idea is nowhere better captured than in the hymn of the Psalmist:

Lord, thou hast examined me and knowest me.
Thou knowest all, whether I sit down or rise up. . . .
Where can I escape from thy spirit? Where can I flee from thy Presence?
If I climb up to heaven, thou art there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, again I find thee. If I take my flight to the frontiers of the morning or dwell at limit of the western sea, even there thy hand will meet me and thy right hand will hold me fast. (Psalm 139:1-2, 7-10, New English Bible)

Religiously, the affirmation of God's omnipresence is the assurance of God's constant watchful care, his loving awareness of all that is transpiring, and his ability to intervene in human history and in our individual lives to fulfill his purposes and promises. Thus it seems that divine omnipresence is crucially related to his power and knowledge and that if he is almighty then he must be omnipresent.

This understanding brings me to consider premise 10. Is it true that an embodied being could not be omnipresent? The question has recently been carefully examined by Grace Dyck [Jantzen]. She correctly points out that the claim "an embodied being cannot be omnipresent is ambiguous between 'His body is not everywhere,' which," she says, "is true but harmless, and 'He is not everywhere,' which is not necessarily true." The harmless truth follows analytically from the meaning of the word body. By definition, a body is spatially locatable and can be in only one place at one time. But if a being is omnipresent, there is no place where it is not. Thus it appears that the notions of omnipresence and corporeality are mutually exclusive.

Dyck rebuts this conclusion by carefully analyzing the meaning of the relevant sense of presence and then, derivatively, of omnipresence. Most critical to her analysis, she shows that (1) it is not the case that I am present only in the volume of space occupied by my body, and (2) to be present at x means, most essentially, to be aware of what is going on at x and, perhaps, to be able to some extent to influence it. In support of (1), a person would surely say of a speaker addressing the Senate that he is present in the Senate chambers even though it is not the case that the spatial

---

215Grace M. Dyck [Jantzen], “Omnipresence and Incorporeality,” Religious Studies 13 (1977): 85-91. My thinking on the issues discussed in this article has been significantly aided by Dyck’s article and her later book, Grace M. Jantzen, God’s World, God’s Body.
coordinates of his body are coextensive with those of the chambers. And as to (2), how would a senator who slowly falls asleep as a bill is read and remains so throughout the ensuing debate correctly answer the question, Were you present when the measure was considered? Or suppose a hearing on a bill to eliminate veteran’s benefits is held in a hospital ward of comatose veterans. Could they correctly be said to be present for the hearing?218

On the basis of her analysis, Dyck concludes that, if God has a body that is spatially locatable somewhere in the universe and if, from that position, he knows and is able to influence everything that is going on, then he could properly be said to be omnipresent. If this conclusion is correct, then premise 10 is false, and the argument from omnipresence fails.

But one may still feel constrained to ask, How would it be causally possible for God to be spatially located in the universe and yet be aware of and able to influence all that is going on? I don’t know. This, I take it, is a question for the theologian or for future revelation. But perhaps two brief suggestions will shed further light. First, Dyck points out that modern mathematicians have shown that three-dimensional geometry is not the only possible geometry, indicating that it is merely a limitation of our conceptual structure that we perceive only three spatial dimensions. Dyck thus conjectures that God may occupy or be localized in dimensions outside our ordinary experience from which he may express his thereness in every part of the universe.219 Second, a glorified body may be the source and locus from which emanates the divine spiritual influence everywhere in the world.

The Argument from Divine Indestructibility

Anselm suggested a further argument for incorporeality when he wrote:

For, whatever is composed of parts is not altogether one, but is in some part plural, and diverse from itself; and either in fact or in concept is capable of dissolution. But these things are alien to thee, than whom nothing better can be conceived of.220

218My illustrations are similar to and suggested by those of Dyck.
220Deane, Basic Writings, 24.
The following seems to capture this line of Anselm's reasoning:

1. God = the most worthy object of religious worship.
2. The most worthy object of religious worship cannot be destructible in fact or in concept.
3. N (If \( x \) is corporeal, then \( x \) is composite).
4. N (If \( x \) is composite, then \( x \) is destructible, in fact or in concept).
5. Hence, God cannot be corporeal.

When we consider premise 12, it seems evident that the most worthy object of religious worship cannot be destructible in fact. And let us grant, arguendo, that a corporeal being would be, of necessity, in some sense be composite. What about premise 14? Is it true that whatever is composite is thereby destructible in fact? Plato's *Phaedo* notes that natural or physical bodies are composite and are often observed to be destroyed through a process of decomposition. From this observation, it is concluded that all bodies, being composite, are likewise destructible. This conclusion, of course, does not deductively follow. And even if all "natural" bodies are liable to decomposition, it does not follow that a "divine" body is. Finally, even if a divine body were not inherently indestructible, it would not follow that God could not everlastingly sustain that body in being. In sum, I find no conceptual incoherence either in the notion of Christ's body being raised incorruptible or in the notion of an incorruptible body per se.

But what about Anselm's worry that a body, even if not destructible in fact, would nonetheless be destructible in concept? Are all bodies destructible in concept? I suppose this depends on our concept. If a body is thought of as merely a composition of little bits of matter, then it seems as if its being decomposed can be imagined. On the other hand, if a body (especially a divine body) is thought of in other terms such as a force field, the idea of its being decomposed is not so readily grasped. But even if we granted that the destruction of any body is consistently thinkable, what difference would it make? Our faith in God and in his promises is ultimately grounded in the integrity of the divine will and character and not in the mesh of conceptual necessity. Thus it seems that divine indestructibility does not require incorporeality.

---

221 Plato, *Phaedo*, 78b–80c.
The Argument from Divine Self-Existence

H. P. Owen provides two additional arguments against divine corporeality. He claims that corporeality is logically incompatible with both self-existence and moral perfection. His argument from divine self-existence is very tersely stated:

God's incorporeality can also be proved from his self-existence. . . .
No material entity can be self-existent; for each is a determination, or mode, of being. Consequently we can always ask of any such entity: "What are its causes and conditions?"²²²

His argument seems to be this:

1. God = the most worthy object of religious worship.
16. The most worthy object of religious worship must be self-existent.
17. N (If x is self-existent, then x is not a determination or mode of being).
18. If God were or had a material body, he would be a determination or mode of being.
19. Hence, God cannot have or be a material body.

Premises 17 and 18 seem open to doubt or, at least, in need of clarification. Concerning 17, Owen has not explained what he means by a "determination or mode of being," but apparently he means something like a species or category of being, but as contrasted with what? Totally undifferentiated being? If so, it seems that 17 proves too much, for personality, as well as corporeality, appears to be a mode or determination of being. By parity of reasoning, then, it would follow that a personal being could not be self-existent. But I see no basis for such a claim. Owen apparently provides the following argument for premise 17:

(1) Of any determination or mode of being, one can always intelligibly ask, What are its causes and conditions?
(2) Of a self-existent being, one can never intelligibly ask, What are its causes and conditions?
(3) Hence, a self-existent being cannot be a mode or determination of being.

Premise (2) appears to be analytically true and (3) apparently follows from (1) and (2), but premise (1) seems questionable. What one can intelligibly ask (for example, without self-contradiction) is a function of the syntax and semantics of one’s language. For example, the reason why a person cannot intelligibly ask about the causes and conditions of a self-existent being is that self-existent simply means “without cause or condition.” Premise (1) does not appear to be analytically true. If I understand “determination or mode of being” correctly, it does not grammatically imply “must or could have a cause.” Whether some particular mode or determination of being is caused or uncaused is dependent on the nature of reality, not on the meaning or structure of language. Thus, it seems, this support for premise 17 fails, and so the premise remains inconclusive. The argument from self-existence thus fails to prove that God must be incorporeal.223

The Argument from Moral Perfection

Owen’s final argument for divine incorporeality is based on the claim that pure spirit is the most perfect form of being. He says:

Moreover, if a dualistic view of mind and matter is correct we can see, not only that God’s pure spirituality is possible, but also that it is the most perfect form of being. All human behavior approaches perfection to the extent that it expresses wisdom, goodness and love. Yet although the body aids these spiritual properties in so far as it offers a medium for their expression, it also inhibits them in many—and some tragically frustrating—ways. Hence only pure Spirit can constitute an absolutely perfect form of personal existence.224

His argument can be summarized as follows:

1. God = the most worthy object of religious worship.
20. The most worthy object of religious worship must constitute an absolutely perfect form of personal existence.
21. Only pure spirit can constitute an absolutely perfect form of personal existence.

223Certainly, ordinary believers do not believe Christ’s resurrected body to be self-existent since its history began on the first Easter morning. Rather, they affirm that the divine person, who rose from the dead on that Easter morning, is self-existent and antedated both his resurrected and mortal bodies. It is perfectly consistent to think of God as a self-existent person with some acquired properties.
224Owen, Concepts of Deity, 19.
22. N (If x is pure spirit, then x is incorporeal).

23. Thus, God cannot be corporeal.

Owen acknowledges that the cogency of this argument depends on the Cartesian view that mind and matter are ontologically distinct—a view he does not attempt to justify. But Owen admits that unless it can be validated, there is no basis for affirming pure spirituality in God, since the concept could not be given any referent or reference range. It is significant to note that most contemporary arguments for divine incorporeality do not consist of positive arguments for it, but rather attempt to salvage the notion of a totally unembodied deity from charges that incorporeality is either cognitively meaningless, logically incoherent, or contra-indicated by the weight of psychological, physiological, and other evidence. I will not rehearse the arguments and evidence here. Suffice it so say that the Cartesian anthropology on which this argument rests does not appear to be rationally compelling.

Assuming arguendo that there could be a totally unembodied mind, why should this be considered the most perfect form of personal existence? Owen suggests that human behavior approaches perfection to the extent that it expresses wisdom, goodness, and love, and that the body inhibits these spiritual properties in "many—and some tragically frustrating—ways." Unfortunately, Owen does not explain just how the body acts as or constitutes such an inhibiting agency. Personally, I find the idea hard to grasp. Certainly, the body is not an independent agency that might override decisions or choices made by the mind. Might it then somehow be the source of all those desires or wants that may incline or tempt one to choose contrary to that which is wise, good, or loving? But to assign all these negatives to the body and nothing but honorific attributes to the mind seems entirely gratuitous and without ground in reason or experience. (Ironically, in orthodox Christian theology, the most maliciously evil person—Satan—is also supposedly an unembodied mind or pure spirit.) It seems much more reasonable to predicate all attributes (praiseworthy and blameworthy) to the person, not to disparate parts of the same.

But suppose we grant that a body is a causally necessary condition of one's ability to feel certain desires or inclinations such as
the desire for food or sexual gratification. Assuming that such desires and inclinations are not intrinsically evil, would they nonetheless necessarily inhibit a person from always choosing rightly? I don't see why. The New Testament describes the mortal Jesus as one who was tempted in all points such as we but without sin. It might well be wondered whether one who has fully confronted temptation in all its forms and guises and who has conquered them all is not more worthy of admiration and worship than one who has never experienced a conflict. It seems then that premise 21 is false, and for all the reasons given, this argument, too, fails to demonstrate that God must be incorporeal.

In sum, it appears that none of these typical arguments for divine incorporeality considered here is sufficient to prove it; thus none of them ought to be a stumbling block to rational acceptance of the Father or the Son as embodied persons.

**Conclusion**

Joseph Smith revealed the doctrine that God is embodied, beginning even before he organized the Church in 1830. As evidenced in the writings of influential early Christian thinkers, the earliest Christians widely believed in an embodied God, and that belief persisted into the fourth and fifth centuries but was lost thereafter. The rational arguments of classical Christian immaterialists, however, fail to demonstrate that God must be incorporeal. Hence, neither historically nor philosophically compelling reasons exist for Christians to doubt the message of modern revelation that God is embodied.

David L. Paulsen is Professor of Philosophy at Brigham Young University.

Funding for this project has been graciously provided by the Richard L. Evans Professorship for Religious Understanding at BYU. Earlier papers on this subject were made possible by professional development leaves granted by the BYU College of Humanities and the Department of Philosophy. The author expresses gratitude for this support, as well as for the significant contributions of student research assistants Mark Ashurst-McGee, Earl Cahill, Benjamin Huff, Dennis Potter, David Sundahl, and Benjamin Wallace, and also for critical suggestions made by reviewers of this paper, as well as the editorial polishing by many at BYU Studies.