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Schleiermacher's supralapsarian christology

Edwin Chr. van Driel
Fordham University, Department of Theology, 441 E Fordham Road, Bronx, NY 10458, USA
edwin.vandriel@aya.yale.edu

Abstract

While several commentators have pointed out the supralapsarian nature of Schleiermacher's christology, this article is the first thorough examination of the nature of Schleiermacher's supralapsarian arguments. I show that Schleiermacher's supralapsarianism is directly based on his doctrine of absolute dependence and divine causality. However, the ontology implied by the latter doctrine is in the end inconsistent with Schleiermacher's christology, and Schleiermacher's system does not seem to have the resources to be saved from this inconsistency.

As several commentators have pointed out, Schleiermacher's christology is supralapsarian in nature.[1] Supralapsarian christology holds that the incarnation is not contingent upon human sin, but that God would have become human regardless of the fall. Supralapsarianism is the minority report in Western theology, but it can boast of a continuous tradition going back to the medieval Franciscans. However, supralapsarianism comes in different kinds, and none of Schleiermacher's commentators gives us a thorough analysis of the structure of his approach. The purpose of this article is to address this gap in the research. As I will show, Schleiermacher's position is highly original, and nothing like that of his medieval predecessors. Most supralapsarian theologies turn around a distinction between the incarnation as the primal and essential goal of God's relationship with humankind, and sin and redemption as its accidental companion. Schleiermacher's approach is very different. His supralapsarian argument is based directly on what lies at the heart of his theology: the notion of absolute dependence of humankind on God. Therefore, we have to start by exploring this dependence

[1] Friedrich Beisser, *Schleiermachers Lehre von Gott, dargestellt nach seinen Reden und seiner Glaubenslehre* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1970), pp. 241–3; Eugene TeSelle, *Christ in Context: Divine Purpose and Human Possibility* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), pp. 69–86; Robert James Sherman, *The Shift to Modernity: Christ and the Doctrine of Creation in the Theologies of Schleiermacher and Barth* (New York: T and T Clark, 2005), pp. 199, 200.

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relationship.[2] In the second part I will lay out the details of Schleiermacher's christology. There we will see how, strangely, sin and redemption are at the heart of the supralapsarian argument. Finally, in the third part I will argue that an inconsistency between Schleiermacher's ontology and christology fatally undermines his proposal.

Schleiermacher's ontological framework

Redemption and absolute dependence

Schleiermacher's theology is a reflection upon the experience of redemption and absolute dependence. Redemption is an experience in which we relate to Christ. We feel how he brings us under his influence. He assumes us into his community; he shares with us his power, and thereby he transforms our existence.[3] By contrast, the experience of absolute dependence is one in which we are conscious of God. Schleiermacher explains this experience by contrasting it with relative dependence. In relationship to finite reality we experience ourselves to be relatively free and relatively dependent, resulting in a relationship of reciprocity. We are both active and passive; we are both on the giving and on the receiving end.[4] However, we also experience both ourselves and all of finite reality to exist in a relationship of absolute dependence. In such relationship there is no reciprocity. We exercise no freedom at all towards the Whence of our absolute dependence. In fact, we experience both our relative dependence as well as our relative freedom to be included in this absolute dependence.[5] The Whence of this absolute dependence is identified as God.[6]

In the Christian life, the experience of redemption and the experience of absolute dependence go always hand in hand.[7] One cannot have one without the other. There is no general God-consciousness which is not bound up with a relation with Christ.[8] Without the redeeming activity of Christ, the feeling of absolute dependence is clouded by sin. It is, says Schleiermacher,

[2] In this, my analysis differs significantly from Eugene TeSelle's work, the most extensive analysis of Schleiermacher's position to date. TeSelle analyses Schleiermacher in terms of the traditional distinction between incarnation as essential completion and accidental redemption.

[3] Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart (eds.), (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999), §§ 100–1, pp. 425–38. Page references to this translation of *Der Christliche Glaube* (*CF*) (1830/1) follow reference to sections (§§).

[4] §§ 4.2, 4.3, *CF* 13–16. Cf. for the identification of 'that which is co-determined by other things' as the finite: § 56.1, *CF* 231.

[5] § 4.3, *CF* 16.

[6] § 4.4, *CF* 16.

[7] § 32, thesis, *CF* 131.

[8] § 62.3, *CF* 261.

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in bondage, and only set free by redemption.[9] Therefore, everything that is said about the God-consciousness without reference to the experience of redemption should be seen as an abstraction from the concrete experience of the believer.[10] On the other hand, there is no relationship with the Redeemer which has no bearing on the general God-consciousness. One cannot build a relationship with Christ at the expense of the priority of the experience of God, without leaving the boundaries of religion.[11]

Schleiermacher's formulations express not only a close relationship between these two sides of the believer's experience, but they also betray a referential order. The experience of Christ serves the experience of God. The activity of the Redeemer is no goal in itself, but serves to bring us to a greater understanding of intimacy with God. To put it differently, the absolute dependence of human beings on God is essential to human existence. It is given with the relationship between creation and creator. By contrast, the need for the redemptive work of Christ is accidental, needed because of the influence of sin on our relationship to God. Sin, however, is not given with creation.

The experience of absolute dependence, modified by the experience of redemption, is for Schleiermacher not only the source, but also the limit of theology: 'All the divine attributes to be dealt with in Christian Dogmatics must somehow go back to the divine causality, since they are only meant to explain the feeling of absolute dependence'.[12] All what we say of God does not denote 'something special in God, but only something special in the manner in which the feeling of absolute dependence is to be related to him'.[13] Our language about God never goes beyond God's causal working on us. But nor, of course, does our experience of God. This will have important consequences for our experience of the incarnation.

Absolute dependence and omnipotence

The notion of absolute dependence has a wider range than our own existence. Not only ourselves, but all of finite reality is taken to exist in absolute dependence on the divine causality.[14] This wider scope is implied by the absoluteness of the experienced dependence. As I noted above, we are relatively independent in relation to finite reality. If finite reality in its turn

[9] § 63.2, *CF* 263.
[10] § 62.3, *CF* 262.
[11] Ibid.
[12] § 50.3, *CF* 198.
[13] § 50, thesis, *CF* 194.
[14] § 5.1, *CF* 19.

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were relatively independent vis-à-vis the divine causality, this would leave my dependence on God not complete. Dependence and independence are in this sense transitive. Absolute dependence is also uniform: absoluteness does not allow for variations.

The exact way in which divine causality relates to the web of finite reciprocal relations is of less relevance to our topic.[15] More important is the modal status of this relationship. Schleiermacher spells it out in two theses. Together they contain his doctrine of divine omnipotence. First, 'the entire system of Nature, comprehending all times and spaces, is founded upon divine causality, which as eternal and omnipresent is in contrast to all finite causality'.[16] This is mainly a repetition of what has already been discussed. The second thesis is more distinctive: 'the divine causality, as affirmed in our feeling of absolute dependence, is completely presented in the totality of finite being, and consequently everything for which there is a causality in God happens and becomes real'.[17] What God actually causes exhausts all possibility. What this means is that there is no alternative for reality as it is. Things cannot be otherwise than the way they are.

Schleiermacher gives four arguments to support this latter thesis. The first refers back to the notion of absolute dependence as the only basis for theological statements. If we say that God could do something other than God does, we go outside the immediate experience of divine causality. We have no ground to do so.[18] When answered that the divine causality extends to all reality, and that reality consists both of the actual and the possible, Schleiermacher tries to undermine the latter part of this thesis. This is his second argument. We come at our notion of the possible by too narrow a focus on the individual and its nature. We call possible that what we ascribe as potential for an individual as based on its nature. But if we would take into account the whole web of finite interaction in which the individual has its place, we would say that what was not realised was also not possible.[19] Third, if we hold that God does not realise all that is possible for God's omnipotence, we would have to accept the notion of divine self-limitation. This however is a notion not given in the experience of absolute dependence.[20] Finally, Schleiermacher's last argument refers to the conceptualisation of the possible as Platonic forms or possible worlds. On many classical conceptions of creation God's causal activity is conceived

[15] See especially §§ 46 and 49, CF 170–8 and 189–93.
[16] § 54, thesis, CF 211.
[17] Ibid.
[18] § 54.2, CF 212–13.
[19] § 54.2, CF 213.
[20] § 54.2, CF 214.

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as electing and creating one of these eternally existing forms or worlds. But this suggests the existence of entities independent of the divine causality, which is excluded by the first thesis of divine omnipotence.[21]

Each of these two theses has a different ontological profile. I will refer to them, economically but somewhat inelegantly, as omnipotence I and II. One of the most characteristic features of the profile of omnipotence I is a qualified notion of creaturely freedom. Schleiermacher does not deny that human beings are free. They are active and not merely passive participants in the system of nature. However, this is a particular kind of freedom. It is, to use some medieval terminology, a freedom of spontaneity, but not a freedom of indifference. Human beings are free to do as they choose, but their spontaneous choosing is founded upon and determined by the divine causality: 'The whole of our spontaneous activity comes from a source outside of us'.[22] Vis-à-vis the divine causality, human beings do not have the freedom to choose or originate another action than they do.

The ontological profile of omnipotence II is more restrictive. Omnipotence I restricts freedom on the level of creation, but it does not restrict freedom for God. It could, for instance, be combined with a libertarian notion of divine freedom. Such freedom is however excluded by the second thesis. On omnipotence II, God cannot do otherwise than that God does. The distinction between divine ability and divine willing collapses. There is nothing that God could do, but does not. Conversely, there is nothing that God does, but that God could refrain from.[23] The result is a lack of ontological space for an alternative reality. It is this last point that has earned Schleiermacher the name of determinist.[24]

[21] § 41.1, *CF* 153–4; § 59, postscript, *CF* 341.

[22] § 4.3, *CF* 16.

[23] § 54.3, *CF* 214–15.

[24] Jacqueline Mariña aims to exonerate Schleiermacher from the charge of determinism by reinterpreting the relationship between God and world by appealing to his notion of freedom of spontaneity ('Schleiermacher's Christology Revisited: A Reply to his Critics', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 49 (1996) pp. 177–200, especially pp. 185–8, 195–8). Julia A. Lamm also qualifies the notion of determinism by expounding Schleiermacher's take on individuality and freedom (*The Living God: Schleiermacher's Theological Appropriation of Spinoza* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), pp. 171–85). However, both discussions are concerned with determinism as implied by omnipotence I. This leaves aside the determinism implied by omnipotence II. We might, on omnipotence I, be free to do spontaneously what we desire; given omnipotence II, our spontaneity has nonetheless only one option open to itself. And not even God could change this option, since God too is limited to only one way of acting.

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Omnipotence I and II not only have their own ontological profiles, but they are also logically independent. We do not have to hold to omnipotence II if we hold to omnipotence I. A reading of the arguments for omnipotence II underscores this. The first and third arguments are based on the experience of absolute dependence. The second argument tries to undermine certain intuitions about the possible. Only the fourth argument is based on omnipotence I. The possible, as a Platonic pantheon of eternal ideas, existing independently of God, is inconsistent with the notion that everything is absolutely dependent on the divine causality. The problem with this argument is that one does not have to conceive of the possible in this way. There are at least two other options available. Cartesian voluntarism holds that possibilities are caused by divine deliberation and choice. The possible is causally dependent on divine willing. Theistic activism holds that possibilities are caused by divine contemplation. The possible is causally dependent on divine knowing.[25] Cartesian voluntarism is not consistent with Schleiermacher's rejection of divine choosing, but theistic activism is. It holds that God's mind necessarily produces the possible. If Schleiermacher were willing to construe the origin of the possible according to theistic activism, there is no argument that leads from omnipotence I to omnipotence II.

It is important to make this last point. As we will see below, the supralapsarian nature of Schleiermacher's christology is based on omnipotence I. It is however omnipotence II that causes problems for Schleiermacher's construal. If omnipotence II is not based on omnipotence I, this leaves open the possibility of trying to repair Schleiermacher's proposal by relinquishing omnipotence II.

Redemption and decree

There is one single divine willing that encompasses all history. History unfolds in time and numerous individuals and events, but God does not govern history by a series of decisions, initiatives and reactions. History unfolds in time, but it is an unfolding of what is determined in God's single, eternal and non-reciprocal will. That is the upshot of the experience of absolute dependence, as interpreted by omnipotence I. God's willing needs to be timeless, Schleiermacher argues, because otherwise time would condition

[25] For a recent discussion of Cartesian voluntarism: Gijsbert van den Brink, 'Descartes, Modalities, and God', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 33 (1993), pp. 1–15; and Alvin Plantinga, *Does God have a Nature* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1980), pp. 95–126. For a recent defence of theistic activism: Thomas V. Morris and Christopher Menzel, 'Absolute Creation', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 23 (1986), pp. 353–62, reprinted in Thomas V. Morris, *Anselmian Explorations* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987), pp. 161–78.

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God, instead of God being the non-conditioned conditioner of all.[26] What omnipotence II adds to the picture is that God's willing is not a form of deliberation and deciding choice, but 'simply an absolute approval'.[27]

For us the most important aspect of the decree is that it is non-reciprocal. Schleiermacher calls this his 'primary and basal presupposition'.[28] This is the basis for Schleiermacher's supralapsarianism. If God does not respond to human actions, the incarnation cannot be interpreted as a divine answer to the human problem of sin. The latter is the heart of the infralapsarian approach. An infralapsarian might conceive of this idea of 'divine response' in different ways. She does not have to conceive of it as being temporal. She might conceive of it as eternal. God might from all eternity foresee that human beings will fall, and consequently foreordain the coming of Christ. In fact, the majority of infralapsarians has taken it this way. However, central to the infralapsarian position is the logical priority of human sin over divine incarnation. For Schleiermacher, such a position is excluded.

Absolute dependence has not only important consequences for the place of the incarnation in the divine decree, but it also influences our take on sin. If everything falls within the scope of divine causality, it seems that this must also hold for human sin. Schleiermacher does indeed not shy away from this conclusion. Sin is 'grounded in human freedom', he says.[29] But our freedom is no more than a freedom of spontaneity, as we noticed. And 'the whole of our spontaneous activity comes from a source outside of us'.[30] Therefore, 'sin's being grounded in our freedom is all the more compatible with its being rooted likewise in the divine causality because, with regard to the feeling of absolute dependence, we recognize no difference between the greater and the less activity of temporal causality'.[31] God is 'the author of sin'.[32]

Schleiermacher qualifies this last statement. He does this by comparing the relationship between divine causality and sin with the relationship between divine causality and redemption.[33] Redemption is the goal of the divine causality. Sin is not; it is only a means. That 'the emergence of sin preceded the advent of redemption in no sense implies that sin was ordained and willed purely for itself'. On the contrary, Schleiermacher continues – and here is a

[26] § 52, *CF* 203–6.
[27] § 55.2, *CF* 225–6.
[28] § 147.2, *CF* 673.
[29] § 81, thesis, *CF* 330.
[30] § 4.3, *CF* 16.
[31] § 81.2, *CF* 333–4.
[32] § 79, thesis, *CF* 325.
[33] § 80, thesis, *CF* 326.

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key text for his supralapsarian stance – 'the very statement that the Redeemer appeared when the fullness of time was come makes it quite clear that from the beginning everything had been set in relation to his appearing'.[34]

With this last point, we have reached the heart of Schleiermacher's theology: that of divine teleology. To talk about the content of divine teleology, we need a firmer ground than the experience of absolute dependence, though. The latter experience cannot distinguish between means and ends.[35] All existence is uniformly dependent on the divine causality. The nature of things or the course of history can therefore not teach us anything about divine purposes.[36] All we can know is that everything is included in the divine decree, not how the divine decree is ordered.[37] For that we need to reflect on that other experience: of the redemptive activity of Christ.

Schleiermacher's supralapsarian christology

Christ the redeemer of creation

While the feeling of absolute dependence is an essential feature of humankind,[38] it is also a universal experience that this consciousness is hampered in its development. Our God-consciousness does not permeate all activities of our self-consciousness. There are lower powers in the soul that are not susceptible to the impulses proceeding from the God-consciousness. They strive to secure for themselves in the finite what can only be given in dependence on God. This obstruction of the free development of the God-consciousness Schleiermacher defines as sin.[39]

Sin is inevitable for us; the strength or weakness of the causal impulses issued from the God-consciousness is not ours to control.[40] Despite its inevitability, sin is, however, not an essential part of human existence.[41] Human nature has the potency to be free from sin and completely permeated by the God-consciousness. Such is the ideal (*Urbild*) of humankind. In Christ this ideal has become history. In him there are no powers that darken his awareness of God; his God-consciousness is 'absolutely powerful' and has

[34] § 80.2, CF 328.
[35] § 46, postscript, CF 177.
[36] § 166.1, CF 728.
[37] Robert Merrihew Adams questions whether a divine decree governed by omnipotence II can be said to have ends and means. If there are no real possible alternatives, is there anything for purposes to explain ('Schleiermacher on Evil', *Faith and Philosophy* 13 (1996), pp. 571–2)? In this article I will leave this question aside.
[38] § 6.1, CF 26.
[39] § 66, CF 271–3.
[40] § 66.3, CF 272–3; § 86.2, CF 356.
[41] § 68, CF 275–9; § 94.1, CF 385.

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perfectly integrated all other parts of the soul. His God-consciousness gives 'impulse to all life's experiences and determines them'.[42] Catherine L. Kelsey gives us a powerful metaphor to understand what such a life is like. She likens the God-consciousness to the experience of a preacher, when

> our attention and all our best skill is directed toward the congregation in front of us and toward being open to what God is using us to show or say at that moment. After the fact, we realize that we said more than we knew to say. Somehow God did something better or bigger than our best effort, yet God worked through that effort. Rather than a 'God-and-me' experience, the experience is one of 'God-through-me-toward-others'.

The life of Jesus, the life of the ideal, was entirely like this precious experience of the preacher, Kelsey suggests. Although for the preacher these experiences are few and far between, for Christ life was an unbroken series of those moments.[43]

Schleiermacher makes two important and related caveats concerning Christ's ideality. First, he does not mean that Christ embodied all talents and possibilities of humankind – 'as though Christ must have been ideal for all knowledge or all art and skill which have been developed in human society'.[44] Rather, the ideality of Christ concerns only his God-consciousness. In all other areas of human existence 'he could only develop in a certain similarity with his surroundings'.[45] Second, ideality does not exclude growth and development. Christ's awareness of God and the integration of the powers of his consciousness were ideal for every moment of his existence, but would never be stronger than the possibilities of stages of life – be it childhood or adulthood – permitted. If this were not the case, it would deny Christ the completeness of his humanity. The ideal does not become history by embodying only a certain moment of human development; it is ideal by embodying, throughout its development, a God-consciousness that is free from any impediment.[46]

Christ's perfect God-consciousness cannot be explained as a natural product of human development. Until Christ, humans had universally wrestled with sin; and 'in the corporate life of sinfulness sin propagates itself naturally'.[47] Christ's presence in the midst of history cannot be explained

[42] § 93.2, CF 378.
[43] Catherine L. Kelsey, *Thinking About Christ with Schleiermacher* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), p. 9.
[44] § 93.2, CF 378.
[45] § 93.3, CF 382.
[46] § 93.3, CF 381–2.
[47] § 89.4, CF 365.

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out of the causal nexus of finite reality. It is none other than a 'miraculous fact'; his God-consciousness a new implanting of supernatural origin.[48] 'The Kingdom of God and the divine procedure in its harvesting and propagation is represented as a special divine activity by itself, apart from the divine government of the world in general'.[49] Nonetheless, this supernatural origin should be carefully qualified. Christ's presence goes back to divine, not finite causality. This divine causality is not, however, new in relation to the divine decree. It is not an addition to the original plan. The divine decree does not allow for add-ons; it is after all 'one, undivided, and eternal', the expression of God's non-reciprocal good-pleasure.[50] The appearance of the ideal is not addition, but completion.[51] This is the ground for the notion of divine teleology. Nothing in the general dependence of all finitude on God betrays a purpose in the divine causality, except for this new implanting.

According to Schleiermacher, 'to ascribe to Christ an absolutely powerful God-consciousness, and to attribute to him an existence of God in him, are exactly the same thing'.[52] Schleiermacher wants to hold to the confessional theorem that in Christ we meet one person in two natures. He believes, however, that subsequent ontological explanation of the formula is marred with difficulties and ripe for revision. The majority of his arguments target the supposed incoherence of the ontological approach. In passing he mentions another argument which, on his own criteria, should be just as convincing.[53] An ontological explanation suggests, in one way or the other, to say something about the being of God. But how God is in God-self does not lie open to our immediate impression; only God's causal activity does. Theology should therefore be confined to a reflection on God's causal working. It is in those terms that Schleiermacher's alternative formulation is cast. He wants to uphold the unique divinity of Christ, in saying that Christ differs from any other human being in that in him 'always and everywhere all that is human in him springs out of that divine'.[54] Note that on this formula the difference between Christ and other human beings is merely quantitative. The reason that our God-consciousness 'cannot fittingly be called an existence of God in us' is that it is 'always dominated by the sensual self-consciousness'. And if it is 'able neither to portray God purely and with real adequacy in thought, nor yet to exhibit itself as pure activity, it cannot be represented as an existence

[48] § 93.3, CF 381; § 95.3, CF 389; § 89.4, CF 365.
[49] § 120.1, CF 552.
[50] § 95.3, CF 389.
[51] Ibid.
[52] § 94.2, CF 387.
[53] § 96.2, CF 396.
[54] § 96.3, CF 397.

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of God in us'.[55] But this, of course, is not an insurmountable difficulty. It is overcome in the redemption.

'The Redeemer assumes believers into the power of his God-consciousness, and this is his redemptive activity', reads Schleiermacher's famous formulation.[56] Based on the foregoing, we can understand what this means. There is a power going forth from the Redeemer, a 'pervasive influence', an impulse that is issued from him and now also starts to work in us.[57] But I have just noted that the uniqueness of Christ is that in him all powers of the soul are issued from his God-consciousness, which is the existence of God in him. This must then also hold about the causal influence of him on us. 'And thus the total effective influence of Christ is only the continuation of the creative divine activity out of which the Person of Christ arose'.[58] In the redeeming activity of Christ, what had happened to him now happens to us. As the special divine activity began in Christ, it now continues through him in us. The divine causality, which integrates all Christ's life's experiences in his perfect God-consciousness, now, through his, empowers ours. It is 'the essence of redemption that the God-consciousness already present in human nature, though feeble and repressed, becomes stimulated and made dominant by the entrance of the living influence of Christ'.[59] And the being of God in Christ is paralleled by and continued in the being of Christ in humanity as a whole.[60] The special divine activity creates thus a pyramid, a corporate life of divine causal indwelling, with Christ as its head and mediator. In the life of the church the causal influence of its founder is thus still palpable and 'in its deepest inwardness, or as an impulse, [it] corresponds to its origin, and consequently, in spite of all reactions, [it] will also increasingly work itself out'.[61] The ideal's epiphany in history has influenced history's direction decisively.

Christ the completion of creation

By influencing history's direction decisively, Christ completes the creation of human nature. Schleiermacher believes that God ordained the creation of humankind in two stages. The first stage is a preparation of the second; the

[55] § 94.2, CF 387.
[56] § 100, thesis, CF 425.
[57] 'pervasive influence', § 100.2, CF 427; 'impulse active in us', § 104.3, CF 455.
[58] § 100.2, CF 427. Cf. § 100.1, CF 425: 'But his act in us can never be anything but the act of his sinlessness and perfection as conditioned by the being of God in him. And so these too in addition must become ours'.
[59] § 106.1, CF 476.
[60] § 106.1, CF 477; § 100.1, CF 427; § 94.2, CF 387–8.
[61] § 88.3, CF 365.

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second the completion of the first. The first, inaugurated by the appearance of the first human, constituted the physical life of the human race. It is a phase in which 'the impartation of the Spirit to human nature . . . was insufficient, in that the spirit remained sunk in sensuousness and barely glanced forth clearly at moments as a presentiment of something better'.[62] The second phase, inaugurated by the appearance of the second Adam, Christ, constituted a new spiritual life.[63] It is the time of the special causal influence of divine presence. Schleiermacher therefore does not shy away from calling Christ's inauguration of the second phase a work of creation, even while creating is a divine act. After all, all God's activity proceeds from the being of God in him.[64]

Redemption and completion are closely interconnected. In the next section we will see that, for Schleiermacher, redemption serves completion. However, completion is also necessary for redemption. I call attention to Schleiermacher's argument about the necessity of Christ's perfect God-consciousness.[65] Schleiermacher asks whether it would not have been enough if Christ had a heightened, but not ideal God-consciousness. He denies this on two grounds. If Christ's God-consciousness were not ideal, we would always carry the hope that one day humankind might surpass Christ and reach the fullness of consciousness of God. It is good to have a consciousness that is strongly directed at God. It is far more desirable never to be deluded by sin at all. However, such a hope would mark the end of the Christian faith. A Christian hope is only directed at an ever-deepening understanding of Christ. Second, if the God-consciousness could continually progress, the creation of humankind would not have been completed. This would, deplorably, place human creatures below other creatures. The unspoken premise here seems to be that humankind is thereby ranked below creatures it should surpass. That is, of course, a rather anthropocentric argument. Schleiermacher might have fared better by connecting his thesis with his notion of redemption. He is correct in saying that if Christ's God-consciousness were not completely perfected, the creation of humankind would not have been completed. The problem with this is not that our ranking in creation's order would be undermined. The problem is that we would not be redeemed. After all, the incompleteness of human nature is precisely the underdevelopment of its God-consciousness. This in turn leads to sin. Redemption comes when Christ, through the perfection of his God-consciousness, takes us up in this

[62] § 89, CF 365–9.
[63] § 95.3, CF 389.
[64] § 100.1, CF 426.
[65] § 93.2, CF 378–9.

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perfection and thereby brings our human nature to completion. Without his consciousness of God being perfect, he might have been able to bring us to a higher level. He would however not have been able to secure our blessedness. Therefore, for Christ to be the Redeemer, he has to have perfection; because only given his perfection, could he bring completion, and only by bringing completion, could he bring redemption.[66]

The supralapsarian Christ

We now have all the material needed to make an analysis of the conceptual structures of Schleiermacher's supralapsarian christology. Its profile is determined, both negatively and positively, by the notion of absolute dependence and the consequent inferred forms of divine omnipotence. Omnipotence II prevents us from analysing Schleiermacher's supralapsarianism in terms of counterfactuals. Much older supralapsarian christologies are formulated as a positive answer to the question: Would God have become incarnate even if humans had not sinned? But if there are no alternatives for reality as it is, as omnipotence II says, this question is meaningless. Schleiermacher's christology can therefore only be analysed in terms of the order of the divine decree.

The order is determined by omnipotence I, and this in a twofold way. First, as I noted above, a decisive point is the non-reciprocity of humans' relationship with God. If we are absolutely dependent on God, God never responds to human actions. And if God does not respond to human actions, the incarnation cannot be interpreted as a divine answer to the human problem of sin. It has to be supralapsarian.

> The Christian faith that all things were created for the Redeemer implies . . . that by creation all things (whether as prepared for or as overruled) were disposed with a view to the revelation of God in the flesh, and so as to secure the completest possible impartation thereof to the whole of human nature, and thus to form the Kingdom of God.[67]

I give this last quotation in full because it calls our attention to an ambiguity in Schleiermacher's thought. To say that 'all things were created for the Redeemer' suggests that the incarnation in Christ is God's prime intention. Other formulations used by Schleiermacher suggest the same.[68] However, the last part of the passage implies something different. The revelation of God

[66] *Contra* Eugene TeSelle, *Christ in Context*, p. 84.

[67] § 164.1, CF 723.

[68] For instance: 'from the beginning everything had been set in relation to his appearing' (§ 80.2, CF 328).

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in the flesh is given with an eye to the most complete impartation thereof not to just one human being, but to the whole of human nature, and thus to form the kingdom of God. Here, the incarnation in Christ is the means to the final goal, the communication of the divine to all. I believe this latter reading to be the correct one. This is supported by other passages: 'When we trace to the divine causality our consciousness of fellowship with God, restored through the efficacy of redemption, we posit the planting and extension of the Christian Church as the object of the divine government of the world', as it reads on the same page.[69] And also: 'the divine purpose [has been] set on the union of the Divine Essence with human nature in the Person of Christ, and, as a result thereof, the union of the Divine Essence with the fellowship of believers through the Holy Spirit'.[70] This last formulation also squares with the idea of a causal pyramid that I proposed in the section on redemption. Christ is the first with whom God seeks this intimate fellowship, but the ultimate goal is, through him, the fellowship with all. Schleiermacher has philosophical reasons not to refer to the incarnation as the goal thereto.[71] Yet in the end, this is how it functions.[72]

[69] § 164, thesis, *CF* 723.

[70] § 164.2, *CF* 724.

[71] Schleiermacher gives four reasons why not to apply 'means' terminology for God's dealing with creation. Means are external to the goal, but the whole of finite existence is included in the goal of God's action. Means are employed when the agent has to take recourse to something not originating in herself, which in the relation between God and the world is excluded by the world's absolute dependence on God. It is difficult to use means terminology without suggesting a form of choice on the part of the agent, whereas God's acts are not based on choice and deliberation. Finally, a work is esthetically more pleasing when all its parts are an integrated whole than when some parts are identifiable as means used for other parts as their goals (§ 168.1, *CF* 733–4). I think in the end we can take all these caveats into account and still use the means and ends language. Schleiermacher's preference for the terminology of parts and wholes fits again in my notion of a causal pyramid, in which the perfect divine impartation to Christ functions as a crucial part of the larger whole, the divine impartation to humankind.

[72] Other texts that support my reading are the references to an unqualified humanity as the address of divine impartation: 'if then the pivot of the divine government is redemption and the foundation of the Kingdom of God, involving the union of the Divine Essence with human nature' (§ 165.1, *CF* 726/7); 'it is only through him that the human God-consciousness becomes an existence of God in human nature, and only through the rational nature that the totality of finite powers can become an existence of God in the world' (§ 94.2, *CF* 388). See also the affirmation that 'every form of the God-consciousness, however imperfect.. ranks for us as a divine impartation to human nature' (§ 166.1, *CF* 728).

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Understanding the incarnation in Christ as a means to the divine impartation to all will be helpful for our next step. Omnipotence I not only determines the place of the incarnation in the divine decree, but it also determines the place of human sin and divine redemption. Here we encounter the most original aspect of Schleiermacher's approach. For other supralapsarian christologies, God's dealing with sin is logically subordinated to the divine intention to become incarnate. Sin is a human act, not rooted in any divine initiative. In redemption the incarnate one deals with human sin, but without this being part of the primal divine intention. That redemption is necessary is better seen as a sign of how much the original intention has been undermined. However, as I noted before, for Schleiermacher sin is not excluded from the scope of divine causality, but God is the author of sin. This calls for a different place of sin in the divine decree. If sin is the fruit of some form of human initiative, there is no problem with seeing it as counter to the prime divine intention; but if God is the author of sin, this would be illogical. Schleiermacher's solution is to integrate sin and redemption in the prime divine intention. Sin is ordained with an eye to the Redeemer.[73] God wants to impart God-self to humankind. The means hereto is Christ, whom God elects to be united with the divine.[74] The next step is to bring the rest of humanity under Christ's causal influence. But what will make humans receptive for Christ's gifts? For this, God ordains sin:

> God has ordained that the earlier insuperable impotence of the God-consciousness shall become for us, as our own act, the consciousness of sin, in order to intensify that longing without which even the endowment possessed by Jesus would have met with no living faculty for the reception of what he communicates.[75]

The order of the divine decree has now become clear. God's primal intention is the most complete impartation of the divine essence to humanity. As a means to this, one person is elected with whom God unites. The instrument by which to impart the divine nature to all is redemption. In order to make humankind receptive for the Redeemer, God ordains sin. To make sin, which is not essential to human nature, nothing but universal and inevitable, God creates human nature in a particular way. Thus, while the last section showed that completion is necessary for redemption, the opposite holds too. Redemption is necessary for completion.

[73] § 65.2, *CF* 270; § 80.2, *CF* 328; § 81.3, *CF* 335–7; § 89.3, *CF* 368; § 164.3, *CF* 726.
[74] On the election of Christ: § 120.2,4, *CF* 553–7.
[75] § 89.1, *CF* 366.

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Note that Schleiermacher never crosses the self-imposed boundaries for his theological discourse. Nowhere does Schleiermacher speak about God's motives. The ultimate goal of the decree is the impartation of the divine nature, but no reasons are given why this is God's first intent. The language of causality is the only acceptable framework to analyse God's actions. This holds even when the end of *The Christian Faith* speaks of the centrality of love in God's teleology. Love is then described as 'the impulse to unite self with neighbor and to will to be in neighbor'.[76] This is a description purely in terms of the causal activity and outcome of the action, not of its motivation. Any notion of value or virtue, emotions, will or motivations is excluded from this christology. The contours of Schleiermacher's supralapsarianism resemble Dionysian reality. It suggests the image of God as the overflowing source of all being, 'the Absolute Vitality',[77] God who necessarily imparts the divine reality to all what is not God.[78] What is missing, though, is the Dionysian perfect goodness as the driving force motivating it all.

Fault lines

Redemption and omnipotence

Consistency is Schleiermacher's hallmark, and my analysis only confirms this. Creative theological reflection on the experience of absolute dependence, modified by the experience of redemption, is the source of both his ontological framework and his supralapsarian christology. Each argument is carefully built on the preceding one. Every Christian doctrine is imaginatively reformulated to fit Schleiermacher's criteria for theological discourse. Nonetheless, a fault line runs through Schleiermacher's proposal – an inconsistency, not within either his ontology or his christology, but between them.

The problem lies in the notion of alternative possibilities. As I noted above, Schleiermacher denies that these exist. According to omnipotence II, the divine causality is completely present in the totality of finite existence. There are no alternatives for reality as it is. Nonetheless, sometimes Schleiermacher

[76] § 165.1, CF 726.

[77] § 51.1, CF 203.

[78] 'We must therefore think of nothing in God as necessary without at the same time positing it as free, nor as free unless at the same time it is necessary. Just as little, however, can we think of God's willing himself, and God's willing the world, as separated the one from the other. For if he wills himself, he wills himself as Creator and Sustainer, so that in willing himself, willing the world is already included; and if he wills the world, in it he wills his eternal and ever-present omnipotence, wherein willing himself is included; that is to say, the necessary will is included in the free, and the free in the necessary'. (§ 54.4, CF 217.)

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writes as if there are. God 'might from the very beginning have arranged the whole march of the human race differently'.[79] Had redemption not been ordained, 'we have the certainty that from the beginning the whole disposition of nature would have been different'.[80] Even more important are two alternatives Schleiermacher does not mention, but which are implicit to his christology. These two are central to my argument. The first is an alternative to the election of Christ. According to Schleiermacher, Christ's human nature is completely identical to ours.[81] The only difference between him and us is sin; but sin is not an essential part of human nature. Christ's and all our individual human natures are open to the sinless life; in all of us 'reside the possibility of taking up the divine into itself, just as did happen in Christ'.[82] But if that is the case, God did not have to choose Jesus to be the Redeemer. He could have chosen any of us.

The second alternative is a variation on the *ordo salutis*. The ultimate goal of the divine decree is God's impartation to humankind. The divine decree organises things so that we all are in need of a Redeemer, whose influence mediates to us the divine impartation. The Redeemer himself receives his power from a direct impartation of the divine. However, since all humans have a potency to receive such impartation, God could have imparted Godself to all of us directly. In this case the ultimate goal of the decree would have been reached, but without the detour of sin and redemption.

Can these alternatives be dismissed? One could try to read the alternatives Schleiermacher himself mentions as part of a rhetorical strategy. Schleiermacher calls attention to the nature of God's actual actions by contrasting them with alternatives. He does not necessarily claim that these alternatives are real. However, my two christological alternatives cannot be dismissed so easily. They are both implied by the identity between Christ's nature and ours. To dismiss them would be to deny this identity, which would also undermine the actual *ordo salutis*. Christ's redeeming work implies the completion of human nature and he can only complete human nature by partaking in it. These alternatives are therefore an integral part of Schleiermacher's christology and anthropology.

I believe the only way forward is for Schleiermacher to change his ontology, by giving up omnipotence II. His christology and anthropology demand greater ontological openness than currently allowed. The implications of such a move are however not just philosophical. A change in

[79] § 120.3, CF 556.
[80] § 164.1, CF 723.
[81] § 94.1, CF 385; § 89.2, CF 367.
[82] § 94.1, CF 385; § 13.1, CF 64.

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Schleiermacher's ontology implies a change in his theology. To give up on omnipotence II means to allow for an alternative reality. But if there is more possible than the actual, current reality rests on a choice. Given omnipotence I, that choice is made by God. But if God chooses, God must have motivations. To give up omnipotence II is to introduce a divine motivation theory. That would be a radical departure from a theology currently only expressed in terms of causal relations. More than of relations of power, it would have to speak of divine psychology.

Absolute dependence and divine motivation theory

Since Schleiermacher's current system does not know of any divine motivation, it is difficult to speculate what such motivation would entail, were it introduced. However, what it must entail is an account of the special preference for Christ, whereas God gives him what any or all could have received. Interestingly, Schleiermacher does face this issue in his discussion of the election of Christ. There he considers the question why precisely Jesus of Nazareth was chosen to be the Redeemer, and not anyone else. His answer is 'that time and place [of the divine impartation] were chosen as the absolute best, that is as yielding the maximum effect'.[83] But Schleiermacher immediately adds that, given divine omnipotence, God is also responsible for the situation in which the choice of Christ would give maximum efficacy.[84] The question therefore cannot be answered, Schleiermacher concludes.

Could Schleiermacher's system contain the notion of divine motivation? Two different puzzles would need to be solved. For the logical minded among us, the pressing issue is whether the tidily woven structure of Schleiermacher's argument allows for omnipotence II to be taken out and to be replaced for a motivation that guides omnipotence I. I tried to make conceptual space for this move by arguing that omnipotence I and II are logically independent implications of the notion of absolute dependence. But that does not completely solve the issue. The question is now how strongly absolute dependence and omnipotence II are connected. Some implications are so strong that one cannot give up the consequent without giving up the antecedent. If omnipotence II is strictly implied by absolute dependence, the rejection of the latter would force Schleiermacher to give up the former, and then the whole system would come crashing down.

The second puzzle is for the more theological minded. In Schleiermacher's proposal, the notion of absolute dependence functions in a twofold way. It is both an ontological principle and a methodological rule. It expresses the

[83] § 120.2, CF 553.
[84] § 120.3, CF 555–6.

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nature of the relationship between Creator and creation, and it limits the discourse of the creatures about the Creator, in saying that our language about God should never go beyond God's causal working on us. However, by relinquishing omnipotence II and introducing divine motivation, we violate the methodological rule. The question is whether we can do this without also undermining absolute dependence as ontological principle.

My own intuition is that Schleiermacher's proposal cannot be saved from either difficulty. Two of Schleiermacher's arguments for omnipotence II, as discussed above, draw a close connection between absolute dependence and omnipotence II. If we hold that God can do more than God does, Schleiermacher argues, we go outside the immediate experience of absolute dependence. We also imply self-limitation on God's side, which does the same. To hold that God can do more than God does is therefore to give up on absolute dependence. To save Schleiermacher's proposal, two things would need to be shown. The first is that the arguments just mentioned concern absolute dependence as methodological rule, not as ontological principle. By relinquishing omnipotence II, we would give up the former, not the latter. The second thing that needs to be shown is that these two functions of absolute dependence are indeed so loosely connected that we can hold on to the ontological principle even when we give up the methodological rule. Thus, it all comes down to the solution to the second puzzle. Here Schleiermacher's own considerations give us not much hope. Defending his methodological rule, Schleiermacher argues for it based on the ontological principle. Knowledge of an object reflects the nature of an object, he states. As the knowledge is composite, the object too must be composite. A composite God cannot be the Whence of the absoluteness of our feeling of dependence. Therefore, no knowledge of God is allowed that would suggest that God is such a composite.[85] However, on Schleiermacher's watch, a theology that accepts divine motivation, deliberation and choice does exactly that.[86] It suggests a composite God and thereby undermines the foundation of the whole system. If Schleiermacher is correct in this line of argument, it seems his system cannot be saved.

Conclusion

Schleiermacher's christology has a highly original profile. His supralapsarianism is based on his doctrine of absolute dependence and divine causality. Because absolute dependence of humans on God implies a non-reciprocal relationship between God and creation, the incarnation cannot be conceived

[85] § 50.2, CF 195/6.
[86] § 54.3, CF 214–15; § 41, postscript, CF 156.

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as a divine response to human sin. And since everything falls within the scope of divine causality, including sin, Schleiermacher does not construe sin as opposition to the divine initiative, but as part of it. Sin and redemption are the means by which God connects all humankind to Christ, through whom the divine impartation enters the world. Finally, since absolute dependence does not allow our theological speech to go beyond the scope of divine causality, Schleiermacher's construal of God's action is cast only in causal terms, with exclusion of a concept of divine motivation.

The same notions of absolute dependence and divine causality that lead Schleiermacher to his supralapsarianism lead him to hold a form of divine omnipotence that excludes any alternative for reality as it is. However, embedded in Schleiermacher's doctrine of redemption, which is part of his supralapsarian argument, lies the idea of alternative realities. God could have ordained redemption and divine impartation to develop differently than they actually do. Careful analysis shows that Schleiermacher will not be able to save his proposals from this inconsistency. On the one hand, to save his christological construal, Schleiermacher would have to give up part of his conception of divine omnipotence and develop a divine motivation theory. On the other hand, if he were to do this, he would very likely fatally undermine the very notions of absolute dependence and divine causality upon which his christological construal is built.

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