

Rejoinder to Scott Williams on the Logic of “Through”

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Abstract: I have recently argued that the Nicene doctrine of the consubstantiality of Father and Son is incompatible with the assertion that the Father created the world “through” the Son (cf. John 1:3; 1 Cor. 8:6; Col. 1:16–17; Heb. 1:2, 10). Scott Williams has critiqued my essay on two grounds: that its argument is circular and that it does not interact with the exegesis of historic pro-Nicene theologians. This essay proposes a rejoinder to Williams. It argues that his accusation of circularity is unconvincing and that historic pro-Nicene exegesis on this matter is unconvincing.

Keywords: Nicene theology, Steven Nemes, Scott Williams, Christology, Trinity

Introduction

I have recently argued (2024) that the Nicene doctrine of the consubstantiality of the Father and Son logically excludes the statement that the Father created the world “through” the Son. My argument is as follows.

On the one hand, pro-Nicene theologians have historically understood the Father’s consubstantiality with the Son to mean that there is between Father and Son only a single power and action (Nemes 2024, 10–13; Williams 2024, 27). Consubstantiality is not merely a matter of the Father and the Son being the same sort of thing, just as Peter and Paul are both human beings. It’s not as if the Father has his own omnipotence and the Son has his own omnipotence, nor as if the Father were the sole subject of certain actions and the Son the sole subject of certain other actions. Rather, consubstantiality in the pro-Nicene tradition means that there is between Father and Son one and only one omnipotence, one and only one omnipotent action of which they are both equally its subjects. Consubstantiality in the Nicene sense means that there is a single concrete reality that constitutes the

divine essence and which is equally and fully the possession of the Father and Son. As John of Damascus says, there is between the Father and the Son “one substance, one godhead, one virtue, one will, one operation” (*Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* 1.8).

On the other hand, the logic of the word “through” is such that to say that *A* does *x* through *B* is to imply that *A* and *B* are not consubstantial in the Nicene sense (Nemes 2024, 14–18). Assume that *A* and *B* are not simply different names for one and the same thing. To say that *A* does *x* through *B* is to imply that there is something *A* does which *B* does not and something *B* does which *A* does not. The something that *B* does which *A* does not typically is something that contributes critically to *A*’s accomplishing *x* through *B*. But if there is something *A* does which *B* does not and something *B* does which *A* does not, then *A* and *B* are distinct agents, each with its own proper power and action. And if *A* and *B* are distinct agents, each with its own proper power and action, then they are not consubstantial in the Nicene sense. Therefore, on the assumption that *A* and *B* are not simply different names for one and the same thing, to say that *A* does *x* through *B* is to imply that *A* and *B* are not consubstantial in the Nicene sense.

For example, suppose a prisoner escapes his cell “through” the jailer. There is something the prisoner does which the jailer does not, namely to step out of the jail cell. Likewise, there is something the jailer does which the prisoner does not, namely to open the cell door. Because there is something the prisoner does which the jailer does not and *vice versa*, the prisoner is a distinct agent with his own power and action, and the jailer is a distinct agent with his own power and action. This shows that the prisoner and the jailer are not consubstantial in the Nicene sense. There is not shared between them only one power and action.

The argument is therefore clear. If the Father and Son are consubstantial in the Nicene sense, then they are not distinct agents, each with his own proper power and action. Rather, they are equally the subjects of one and the same power and action. But if one says that the Father created the world *through* the Son, then there must be something the Father does which the Son does not and something the Son does which the Father does not. For example, in this scenario the Father alone would initiate the process of creation whereas the Son alone would come into direct contact with created things as the immediate cause of their coming into being. This would clearly turn the Father and the Son into distinct agents, each with his own proper power and action. But that would be contrary to their consubstantiality in the Nicene sense. Therefore, if the Father and Son are consubstantial in the Nicene sense, then one cannot say that the Father created the world through the Son. This all follows

from the implication of the word “through” in sentences of the form “A does x through B.”

At the same time, there are passages in the New Testament which seem at least at first glance to teach that the Father created the world through the Son. Certainly this is what follows if these texts are interpreted in keeping with the “early high Christology” trend of contemporary New Testament studies. For example, Hebrews 1:2 reads that “In these last days [God] has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, *through whom* [*di’ hou*] he also created the worlds” (see also John 1:1–3; 1 Cor. 8:6; Col. 1:16–17). These passages seem either to imply (John 1:3, 1 Cor. 8:6, Col. 1:16–17) or else straightforwardly to assert (Heb 1:2) that God or the Father created all things through Jesus Christ his Son.

I then argued that this situation generates trouble for the contemporary pro-Nicene theologian (2024, 18–23). To the extent that one feels pressure to affirm the proposition that the Father created the world through the Son,—especially if one is sympathetic to the readings of the New Testament provided by proponents of early high Christology,—to that extent one must give up the Nicene idea of the consubstantiality of Father and Son. This is especially ironic in view of the fact that many contemporary proponents of Nicene theology enthusiastically appeal to the proponents of early high Christological readings of the New Testament in support of their theological commitments (e.g., Crisp 2009; White 2015; cf. Nemes 2024, 13–14). But to the extent that one does not wish to give up the Nicene idea of the consubstantiality of Father and Son, one must find a way to avoid affirming the proposition that the Father created the world through his Son. I note that there are different possibilities for doing that. One might try to interpret the relevant New Testament texts otherwise than as affirming that the Father created the world through his Son. This was the strategy of Socinians and Unitarians in past generations. Alternatively, one may subordinate the authority of the New Testament texts to that of later bishops and church councils.

In a response to me published in the same issue of the journal *Philosophia Christi*, Scott Williams (2024, 26) puts forward two principal critiques of my argument. First, he says that my argument is circular and therefore logically invalid. Second, he says that my essay is weak for the reason that he does not interact at any length with historic pro-Nicene exegetes who address the apparent biblical statement that the Father created the world “through” the Son. And in addition to these two principal critiques, Williams also raises a number of other points over the course of his argument.

My purpose in what follows is to offer a rejoinder to Williams in defense of my argument. I will address Williams's claims and counterarguments in the order they appear in his response to me.

Logical Circularity

Williams's first objection to my argument is that it is circular. Williams (2024, 30–31) presents a formal reconstruction of my argument, the first premise of which is:

1. If *A* is said to have done something through *B* and it is assumed that *A* and *B* are not simply the same thing, then there is something that *A* does, which *B* does not, and something that *B* does, which *A* does not.

From this premise, my argument infers by way of straightforward deductions that to say that *A* does *x* through *B*, on the assumption that *A* and *B* are not simply different names for one and the same person, is to imply that *A* and *B* are not consubstantial in the Nicene sense. But Williams insists that the first premise of the argument is precisely the point in dispute between me and pro-Nicene theologians. Therefore, he concludes that my argument is "logically invalid because it begs the question" (2024, 31).

By way of response, the following points can be made.

First, it is not possible for an argument to be both circular and logically invalid. To say that an argument is *circular* is to say that the proposition constituting the argument's conclusion is also serving as a premise in its own favor. In a circular argument, *P* is being inferred from *P*. But to say that an argument is logically *invalid* is to say that the truth of the premises would not guarantee the truth of the conclusion. Yet if the conclusion of an argument is also one of its premises, then the argument is logically valid by definition insofar as clearly the truth of a proposition logically guarantees the truth of that same proposition. It is always valid to infer *P* from *P*. Thus, contrary to Williams's assertion, my argument cannot be both circular and logically invalid. It *must* be valid if it is to be circular also.

Second, Williams's complaint about circularity seems weak. my argument is deductive in nature. It begins with a general principle about the implications of sentences of the form "*A* does *x* through *B*" and then applies the principle to the concrete case of "the Father created all things through the Son." It is the same as arguing that, because all men are mortal and Socrates is a man, therefore Socrates is mortal. But *any* deductive argument can seem circular to a person who is strongly inclined to reject its conclusion. Indeed, the more strongly a person is inclined to

reject a given proposition *P*, the more he is also disposed to reject *a priori* any other propositions from which *P* could be derived. In his desire to make himself invulnerable to counterarguments, like an alchemist he makes a *modus tollens* out of every possible *modus ponens*. This can especially be observed in heated arguments and debates about matters that people feel very strongly about, e.g. matters of religion, ethics or politics. And because such a zealous denier of *P* is disposed to reject any other propositions from which *P* could be derived, any argument that makes appeal to such propositions will strike him as circular. Thus, a person who for whatever reason rejected with great enthusiasm the proposition that Socrates is mortal would also reject the classic argument for his mortality on the grounds that it is circular. “After all,” this hypothetical disputant would allege, “if Socrates is not in fact mortal, as I’ve been saying all this time, then obviously I will say that either not all men are mortal or else he is not really a man after all. This argument consequently does not move the discussion forward. It rather presupposes a perspective I plainly would reject!” The same thing seems to me to be happening when Williams complains that my deductive argument is circular and proposes instead that perhaps not all sentences of the form “*A* does *x* through *B*” carry the implications I think they do.

Any deductive argument can seem circular to a person who rejects its conclusion and any other propositions from which the conclusion might be derived. But this is not always a terrible fault with the argument itself. Indeed, the question of circularity can be ignored altogether. To my mind, the really important question is: What do we have more reason to believe—the critical premise of the deductive argument or the denial of its conclusion? Between two parties who dispute the mortality of Socrates, the real question is whether there is more reason to affirm that all men are mortal and that Socrates is a man than there is to deny that Socrates is mortal. Similarly, in the dispute between me and Williams, the real question is whether there is more reason to affirm my premise about the implication of “through” than there is to deny my argument’s conclusion. To this we now turn.

The Logic of “Through”

I argue that, on the assumption that *A* and *B* are not simply different names for one and the same thing, to say that *A* does *x* through *B* is to imply that there is something *A* does which *B* does not and something *B* does which *A* does not. This in turn implies that *A* and *B* are not consubstantial in the Nicene sense. I defend this assertion by appealing to a number of examples (2024, 14–18).

To give a new example, suppose a traveler in a foreign country communicates with a local “through” an interpreter. The foreigner alone speaks in his own native language whereas the interpreter alone speaks in the local’s own native language. In this and other such cases, the one doing something *through* another and the one *through whom* that something is done are distinct agents, each with his own proper power and action, and thus not consubstantial.

Williams proposes three objections to this analysis.

First, Williams proposes that my argument relies on the assertion that “statements of the form, ‘*x* performs (token) action, *A*, through *y*,’ ... can never be equivalent statements of the form ‘*x* and *y* perform (the same token action), *A*’ (2024, 33). To this Williams rejoins that “statements need not be grammatically equivalent to express the same state of affairs” (33). For example, the sentence “My skateboard was run over by a car” and “The car ran over my skateboard” are for Williams grammatically distinct sentences. In one the verb is active whereas in the other the verb is passive. This difference in the voices of the verbs in turn implies a difference in subjects. In one sentence there is a direct object whereas in the other there isn’t. But despite these grammatical differences, the sentences still express one and the same state of affairs.

By way of response, it should be noted that the grammatical differences between these sentences proposed by Williams correspond to real ontological distinctions in the state of affairs itself to which the sentences refer. Consider the state of affairs which can be variously described as the car’s running over the skateboard or the skateboard’s being run over by the car. It is the car that does the running over and not the skateboard. It is the skateboard that is run over and not the car. There is thus a real difference between agent and patient in the state of affairs itself. The state of affairs is not simple but rather composite, containing within itself really distinct dimensions and aspects, and it is precisely for that reason that one and the same state of affairs can be described in both active and passive terms. There is an appropriate ontological diversity in the state of affairs itself that allows for grammatical diversity in the ways one describes it.

Something similar can be said in the case of sentences using the word “through” as well. Assuming that *A* and *B* are not simply different names for one and the same thing, to say that *A* does *x* through *B* is to imply that there is something *A* does which *B* does not and something *B* does which *A* does not. The word “through” serves precisely to bring to light this real distinction of proper actions and powers internal to the single state of affairs that is described as a whole as “*A*’s doing *x* through *B*.” This does not mean, as Williams seems to suggest, that there can be *no* action of which both *A* and *B* might be the subjects. For example, the king and the messenger

through whom he sends a message do both participate in that one and the same action that is the king's sending a message. I do not deny this (Nemes 2024, 17). But my point is that to say that the king sends the message *through* the messenger implies that, *beyond* their shared action, there are *further* actions which are unique to each person involved and which therefore establish them as distinct agents, each with his own proper power and action.

Second, Williams proposes a counterexample to the rule that to say that *A* does *x* through *B* is to imply that *A* and *B* are distinct agents each with its own proper power and action. It is as follows:

Consider the following statement: "My right index finger is pointing toward that door through its position relative to that door." This is a grammatical sentence in English that uses the preposition "through," but it does not assume, nor entail, distinct agents cooperating in accomplishing something (Williams 2024, 33).

Although Williams insists on the same page that a number of counterexamples could be given to my proposed rule about the implications of the word "through," this is the only one he provides in his essay.

By way of response, Williams has misinterpreted my rule. He interprets my rule as presupposing the notion of an "agent" in the sense of a rational agent or person. But my article (2024, 15) already considered examples of "through" statements in which one of the agents involved is *not* a distinct person, e.g. a person's writing *through* his forearm or speaking *through* his vocal cords. Thus, Williams seems to be offering a counterexample to a principle that I never endorsed. Not only that, but Williams's counterexample even seems to illustrate my rule rather than refute it.

This can be shown in two ways, one quick and the other long. The quick way is as follows. In Williams's example, the finger is clearly one sort of thing, namely a body part, and the position is another, namely a spatial property. The finger can be tan, or bent, or hurting, or broken, or shapely, or simian, but the position relative to the door *cannot* be any of these things. Different things are possible for the finger *qua* body part than are for the position *qua* spatial property. This means that the finger and the position are *not* consubstantial in the Nicene sense. Thus, Williams has not in fact provided an example of a sentence where the preposition "through" links terms referring to consubstantial entities.

The longer way is as follows. Williams says that his right index finger points at the door *through* its position relative to the door. I would ask, Is there something that the finger does in this situation which the position does not, as well as something the position does which the finger does not? Yes. The *finger* points at the door. The

finger alone in this situation is the sort of thing that *can* point at the door. But the finger by itself does not *necessarily* point at the door. It could be pointing at other things, too. The finger can exist without pointing at the door. That's why something else must be *added* to this scenario in order to make the finger point to the door. This something else is *the position relative to the door*, which is a sort of spatial property. This is what *directs* the finger's pointing so that it is pointing at the door. The position alone in this situation is the sort of thing that can make an already pointing thing to point at something else. At the same time, the position *by itself* does not point at anything, nor can it make just anything whatsoever to point at something. For example, a perfectly round and uniform orb could be placed in the very same position relative to the door without thereby pointing at the door.

It is therefore clear that the finger and the position relative to the door are each doing something different in this scenario. The finger alone is what points. It alone, *qua* concrete body of a certain shape, is the sort of thing that can point at other things. The position alone directs the finger's pointing toward the door. It alone, *qua* spatial property, is the sort of thing that can direct a pointing thing toward something else. That is why one can say that the finger points at the door *through* its position relative to the door: because each factor in this situation (concrete body and spatial property) makes a unique contribution by its own proper "power" to the effectuation of the whole state of affairs that is the finger's pointing at the door *through* its position. And this is sufficient to prove that the finger and its position are not consubstantial in the Nicene sense.

One reviewer complains that this argument "seems like it would lead to a bloated ontology of events once we get concrete things *and* their various properties all performing distinct 'actions.'" *Respondeo*: What one person finds "bloated," another may find necessary for making sense of all the facts. But in any case, I think the response is really quite intuitive. Individuals and their properties are different sorts of things that "do" different things. For example, individuals instantiate properties while properties characterize individuals. Individuals do not characterize properties (nor other individuals, for that matter). One could say that properties are instantiated *through* individuals while individuals are characterized *through* their properties. That is because they perform different ontological tasks, i.e. there's something the one thing does that the other doesn't and *vice versa*. Take the example of a red bird. The bird (individual) instantiates redness (property), while redness (property) characterizes the bird (individual). One could say that the bird is characterized *through* its redness or that the redness is instantiated *through* the bird. Yet the bird and the redness are clearly *not* consubstantial in the Nicene sense, since there is something the redness does which the bird does not and *vice versa*. Indeed,

they even belong to distinct ontological categories. Once again, this use of the word “through” plainly implies that there’s something *A* does which *B* does not and something *B* does which *A* does not.

Another reviewer insists that I should respond differently to Williams’s objection. The reviewer writes that “Williams attributes a principle to Nemes which is stronger than Nemes needs,” and that a better response would be to state that “what is presupposed [. . .] is that *A* and *B* are causal agents (whether intelligent or not), that is to say, things which can exercise causal powers,” such as Father and Son are thought to be. This response would also make Williams’s counterexample to my argument irrelevant. For my part, I don’t find it at all mysterious or extravagant to say that the finger or the bird (a concrete individual) is one thing with a certain “activity,” very broadly speaking, and the position relative to the door or the redness (a property) is another thing with a distinct “activity,” very broadly speaking. But all the same, I mention this point here as a second possible line of response to Williams, with due thanks to the reviewer.

Third, Williams raises a question: “Where in Scripture do we find this linguistic rule [about the implication of the preposition ‘through’] explicitly given?” (2024, 34). The gist of the question seems to be that it is either illegitimate or else as yet unjustified to appeal to such a rule for making sense of certain biblical passages.

By way of response, it seems irrelevant whether the rule is ever explicitly proposed in the biblical texts or not. The rule about the implications of using the word “through” is a natural fact about the use of that word in human language that can be easily recognized apart from the interpretation of scripture.

The biblical texts inherit the rules and properties of ordinary language insofar as they are written in ordinary language. That is the reason why seminary students are taught Hebrew and Greek: because the rules of these natural languages necessarily inform the interpretation of the texts themselves. The biblical texts are not written in an utterly unique language of their own. They were not composed in a secret code known only to God and their human authors and a special group of privileged readers. The biblical texts are rather *at least* natural phenomena—human texts written in human language that follow the patterns and rules of human language—even if they may also be more than such.

For example, no one—not even a universal council of bishops or the Pope or an angel from heaven—could responsibly interpret Paul at 1 Cor. 15:4 to be saying that Christ was *not* raised from the dead, even though the text there says that Christ *was* raised from the dead. Why not? Because if Paul had wanted to say that Christ was *not* raised from the dead, then he would have included the negative particle *ouk*. Why would he have done so? Because that is how one makes negative statements in

Koiné Greek. Admittedly, this rule isn't found explicitly stated anywhere in the Bible, but neither is it illegitimate for that reason. There is no reason to think that Paul was writing within a context in which for whatever reason he would have been understood as intending the logical opposite of what he explicitly says. Nor is there any reason in context for thinking that he intended to write the *ouk* but simply omitted it by error. One can therefore exclude the interpretive proposal that Paul meant that Christ was *not* raised from the dead, even though he did not include the word "not" (*ouk*). The reason why one can exclude this proposal is because such an interpretation is simply inconsistent with the rules and logic of ordinary language. To deny that it can be excluded on these grounds is to untether biblical interpretation and theology entirely from the real world.

Something similar can be said regarding the use of the preposition "through" (*dia*). I pointed out that the use of the word "through" in ordinary language serves the purpose of bringing to light a real distinction of power and action between agents who work together in bringing about some single state of affairs (Nemes 2024, 18). To say that the king sent a message *through* a messenger is to call attention to the fact that the king and messenger are distinct agents, each with his own proper power and action. The king did not deliver the message himself but only dictated it and arranged for its delivery, whereas the messenger did not determine the content of the message himself but only delivered it in person. To say that a prisoner escapes his cell *through* the jailer is to call attention to the fact that the prisoner and the jailer are distinct agents, each with his own proper power and action. The prisoner does not open his cell door but only steps out of it, just as the jailer does not himself exit the cell but only makes it possible for another to do so by opening the door. And in the same way, to say that the Father created the world *through* the Son implies that the Father and Son are distinct agents, each with his own proper power and action and therefore not consubstantial in the Nicene sense.

A reviewer comments that the examples given by I "do something to serve as 'intuition pumps,' but don't really seem to amount to proof that this is simply what the word 'through' means." *Respondeo*: It is very easy to multiply such examples *ad infinitum*, in each case demonstrating a distinction of agents. (Indeed, another review suggested that a number of such examples be cut from this essay in order to make it less repetitive!) But apart from the controverted case of the Trinity itself, there is *no* readily apparent example in which one says that *A* does *x* through *B* in which (i) *A* and *B* are not simply different names for the same thing and (ii) there is nothing at all that *A* does which *B* does not also do and *vice versa*. Even the *OED* gives this definition of "through": "By means of; by the intermediate agency of; with the aid of; via" (III.12.a). To my mind, the appeal to the dictionary, the ease of multiplication

of examples of felicitous usages, and the apparent impossibility of conceiving of even one natural, uncontroversial counterexample serve as quite strong evidence that “through” does in fact carry the meaning I asserted it does. Therefore, Williams’s proposed arguments against my rule about the implication of the word “through” do not seem successful.

The Biblical Basis

Williams also presents a case for thinking that the sentence that the Father created the world through the Son is not actually supported by the biblical evidence (2024, 34–35). He argues as follows. John 1:3 does not say that God made all things through the Word but only that all things came into being through the Word. First Corinthians 8:6 does not say that God made all things through the Lord Jesus but only that all things are from God and that all things are through and for the Lord Jesus. Colossians 1:16–17 does not say that God made all things through Christ but only that all things came into being in, through, and for Christ. In this way, Williams attempts to undermine my claim that the problematic proposition that the Father created the world through the Son can be supported by the New Testament. What these New Testament passages teach on Williams’s alternative reading is at most the statement that the Son is the cause of all things’ coming into existence. This by itself would not imply that he is the one *through whom* someone else caused things to come into existence.

Williams’s argumentation on this score initially seems plausible but ultimately succumbs to heavy objections.

First, Williams does not interact with one of the passages mentioned by my article (2024, 13). Hebrews 1:2 says: “In these last days [God] has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom [*di’ hou*] he also created the worlds.” Suppose one interprets this single passage in such a way as to mean that the Father created all things through the Son. This by itself would be sufficient for my purposes. It would establish at least one verse of the New Testament in which a high Christological interpretation yields a proposition inconsistent with Nicene orthodoxy. The fact that Hebrews apparently says that the Father created the world through his Son also lends credence to the idea that this is what other authors had in mind by saying that all things came into being through the Son. On the other hand, there is certainly no sentence in the New Testament which says that there is between Father and Son only one and the same power and action.

Second, my interpretation of these other passages seems more natural than Williams’s. There is such a thing as the “divine passive” in the Bible (cf. Wallace

1996, 437–438). Sometimes a passive verb is used without a prepositional phrase denoting the active agent. The implied agent of the action in many cases is often God, and other passages will even make this explicit. For example, Jesus says that those who mourn are blessed because “they will be comforted” (Matt. 5:4). It is clear that God will be the one who will comfort them. Revelation 7:17 says in turn that “God will wipe every tear from their eyes.” So also, the angel tells the women at the empty tomb that Jesus is not there, “for he has been raised” (Matt. 28:6). The clearly implied agent of Jesus’s raising is God. Other texts will then assert straightforwardly that God raised Jesus from the dead (Acts 2:32).

Something similar can also be said of the passages Williams tries to reinterpret. The very first sentence of the Bible is: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). The idea that God is the creator of all things and therefore the agent of the coming into being of all things is fundamental to the worldview of the biblical authors: “Have you not known? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth” (Isa. 40:28). Consequently, it is very natural to understand God as being the implied agent in passive constructions describing the creation or coming into being of all things. Whereas the Old Testament describes God directly as the creator of all things, what is unique about the New Testament passages referenced by me and reinterpreted by Williams (viz., John 1:3, 1 Cor. 8:6, Col. 1:16–17) is that they at least seem to introduce Jesus/Christ/the Word/the Son as the one “through whom” (*di’ hou*) all things came into being. When seen through the lens of the category of the divine passive, this is clearly the same as saying that God caused all things to come into being *through* Christ.

For example, John 1:3 says that all things came into being through the Word. But John 1:1–2 says that the Word was in the beginning with God. If all things came into being *through* the Word, it is natural to wonder who it was that made use of the Word to bring all things into being. It does not seem likely that the Word alone could have made all things without God’s doing anything. Was God simply a passive bystander, uninterested and uninvolved in the Word’s act of creation? That would go against Genesis 1:1. It seems more plausible to understand John as saying that God was the one who made all things through the Word who was with him. All things were made by God, which is what Genesis teaches, whereas the addition which John makes to this idea is that God made all things through the Word. This is especially plausible when one considers how Wisdom 9:1 praises God for having created all things “through your word” (*en logōi sou*). The preposition used is not the same in both cases, but the connotation of instrumentality is still there. There is certainly precedent in the Old Testament for asserting that God created all things

through his Word. It is therefore quite natural to understand John 1:3 as implying that God created all things through the Word even if it does not explicitly say this.

Origen notably agreed with this line of interpretation. He argues: “So here too, therefore, if all things were made through [*dia*] the Word, they were not made by [*hypo*] the Word, but by one better and greater than the Word. And who would this other one be except the Father?” (*Commentary on the Gospel according to John* 2.72). Origen therefore understood the use of the passive verb and the preposition “through” to imply an ultimate agent distinct from the Word himself.¹

For these reasons, my interpretation of the relevant biblical passages seems more plausible than Williams’s.

Interpreting “Through”

Williams’s second principal complaint against my essay is that I did not address the ways in which historic pro-Nicene exegetes understood the idea that the Father created all things through the Son (2024, 35). Williams specifically appeals to Basil of Caesarea, John Chrysostom, and Thomas Aquinas.²

This is indeed a legitimate complaint that identifies a real weakness in my essay. At the same time, these authors’ interpretations do not by any means resolve the dispute at hand. By way of response, the argument will be made here that Basil’s comments referred to by Williams are irrelevant to my argument and that Chrysostom’s and Aquinas’s interpretations are exceedingly implausible. Consequently, it does not yet seem possible to avoid the conclusion of my argument that Nicene theology is inconsistent with the apparently biblical statement that the Father created all things through the Son.

Basil’s *On the Holy Spirit* proposes to respond to an argument from Aetius to the effect that the use of different prepositions in describing the Father’s, Son’s, and Holy Spirit’s relation to the creation is tantamount to asserting a difference in nature between them (Williams 2024, 35–39). In response, Basil points out that various different prepositions can be used of the same person. For example, of God the

¹ A reviewer writes: “Origen ... is hardly the only pre-Nicene theologian to think that God the Father created through the Logos. This was the standard pre-trinitarian view that came to dominate the theologian class” and cites Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 67, *Dialogue with Trypho* 55; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 2.2; Clement of Alexandria, *Exhortation* 12; Novatian, *On the Trinity* 31; Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical Theology* 1.20; *Refutation of All Heresies* 10.33.1–6; Augustine, *Sermon on the NT* 2.13, *Confessions* 11.2.4.

² A reviewer comments that “Basil’s exegesis and arguments [do] not seem ‘premier,’ but rather polemical and insensitive to the original meaning of the texts.”

Father: “from him, through him, and for him are all things” (Rom. 11:36). The same prepositions can also be used of different persons in different places. For example, it’s true that all things are “from” the Father (1 Cor. 8:6) but also that we may reap eternal life “from” the Holy Spirit (Gal. 6:8). It’s true that all things came into being “through” the Word (John 1:3) but also that Christians are drawn into fellowship “through” the Father (1 Cor. 1:9) and that God reveals things “through” the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 2:10). Basil thus takes himself to have shown that the use of different prepositions does not prove a difference in nature between the persons of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It’s rather that different prepositions are used to show that there is in fact a distinction of persons between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Williams 2024, 37).

By way of response, it should be asserted that this line of argumentation is entirely irrelevant to the success or failure of my argument. I was not proposing Aetius’s argument to the effect that the use of different prepositions implies a difference in nature between the persons. I was rather trying to show that the use of the preposition “through” in sentences of the form “*A* does *x* through *B*” implies that there is something *A* does which *B* does not and something *B* does which *A* does not. And if there is something *A* does which *B* does not and something *B* does which *A* does not, then *A* and *B* are distinct agents, each with his own proper power and action, which is to say that *A* and *B* are not consubstantial in the Nicene sense. That is why a proponent of Nicene theology cannot affirm the proposition that the Father created the world through the Son.

None of the evidence Basil brings forth is inconsistent with my central contention.³ It rather seems to support it. A single example will suffice. Paul says that Christians are no longer slaves but made heirs alongside Christ “through God” (Gal. 4:7). It is clear that there is in this situation something which God does that Christians do not, namely to make someone else an heir. There is also something which Christians undergo that God does not, namely to be made heirs of something. God and Christians are thus distinguished from one another and so are not consubstantial in just the way that the skateboard is distinguished from the car that runs over it and is not consubstantial with it.

It is in John Chrysostom and Thomas Aquinas that Williams finds a specific interpretation of the proposition: “the Father created all things through the Son.”

³ A reviewer writes that “William’s reliance on Basil is odd; everything Basil says in the quoted passages is consistent with the members of the Trinity agreeing in their actions in the sense of always (and perhaps necessarily) *cooperating with* one another (via different actions). He does not clearly presuppose the view that tradition later settled on, the one we see in John of Damascus or (as Williams has shown) at the third council in Constantinople.”

John and Thomas specifically appeal to the notion of “appropriation” (Williams 2024, 40–43). Both authors take for granted that the Father is unbegotten and the Son is begotten. For them, to say that the Father created all things “through” the Son is to call attention to the fact that the Son possesses his divine nature and power to create because of the Father. John says that the word “through” serves to clarify that the Son is not an unbegotten principle alongside the Father and that the attribution of creation to the Son nevertheless implies his sameness of nature with the Father (*Homilies on the Gospel of St. John* 5.2). Thomas similarly says that all things came into being “through” the Son in the sense that the Son possesses the power to create all things from the Father (*Summa Theologiae* 1.45.6.2).

By way of response, it must be insisted that this is an unconvincing and unnatural line of interpretation. A few points can be made against it.

First, it should be noted that both John and Thomas seem to take for granted the propriety of the assertion that the Father created all things through the Son. They implicitly recognize the Father as the creator of all things, standing on the other side of the Son as the one through whom he creates all things in some way or other. This is why they refer to the begottenness of the Son at all. Thomas thus says:

Hence to be the Creator is attributed to the Father as to Him Who does not receive the power of creation from another. And of the Son it is said (John 1:3), Through Him all things were made, inasmuch as He has the same power [of creation], but from another; for this preposition through usually denotes a mediate cause, or a principle from a principle (*ST* 1.45.6.2)

This counts as a further point in favor of my interpretation of the New Testament texts mentioned above as being more natural than Williams’s.

Second, John’s and Thomas’s interpretation is founded upon clearly false assertions. To say that the Father creates all things “through” the Son does not have anything to do with the Son’s being begotten rather than unbegotten as the Father is. Neither does attributing creation to the Son imply that he is of the same nature as the Father. There is a plain *non sequitur* in both cases. This point can be elucidated through hypothetical examples.

Suppose that there are two unbegotten principles. The first of them asks the other to create a world of a certain sort, providing very specific instructions about what the world should be like. The second principle then submits to this request and creates the world in question. It would be perfectly sensible in this scenario to say that the first principle created a world “through” the second. But the use of this preposition would not imply that the second principle is begotten. After all, they are

both unbegotten *ex hypothesi*. What the preposition “through” brings to light is rather that the first principle does something the second does not, namely to initiate the process, and the second principle does something the first does not, namely to directly create something. Put another way, each principle has its own unique contribution to make to the total event of the creation of a world. Therefore, the use of the preposition “through” in the assertion that the Father created the world through the Son likewise has nothing to do with the begottenness of the Son. The use of it would be consistent with maintaining *per impossibile* that the Father and Son are both unbegotten.

Suppose again that there are two unbegotten principles. One of these is of such a nature as to be capable of creating whereas the other is not. That unbegotten principle which is incapable of creation then requests that the other principle create a world for him of such and such a sort. The other unbegotten principle that is capable of creation submits to this appeal and does as he was asked. It would be perfectly sensible in this scenario to say that the first principle created a world “through” the second. But this would not at all imply that the two principles are of the same nature. Only one of them is of such a nature as to be capable of creation *ex hypothesi*. What that preposition brings to light is rather that the one unbegotten principle did not act entirely on his own. Both principles made a unique and particular contribution to the completion of the whole process of creation. Therefore, the use of the preposition “through” in the assertion that the Father created the world through the Son has nothing to do with the sameness of nature or consubstantiality of Father and Son. The use of it would be consistent with maintaining *per impossibile* that the Father and Son are of different natures.

This simple thought experiment shows that John’s interpretation of the assertion that the Father created all things through the Son is founded upon a double *non sequitur*. The assertion that the Father creates through the Son does not imply that the Son is begotten, nor does the attribution of creation to the Son imply that he is of the same nature as the Father. And these same points also count against Thomas’s assertion that the biblical text teaches that all things were made “through” the Word (John 1:3) because the Word possesses divinity and therefore the power to create in virtue of his being begotten by the Father (ST 1.45.6.2).

John’s and Thomas’s interpretation is an unnatural rendering of the meaning of the preposition “through.” It seems to be the sort of interpretation one could only ever think up if one were *already* committed to the Nicene doctrine of the consubstantiality of Father and Son and had to find some way of avoiding the clear implication of saying that the Father made all things *through* the Son. Williams seems to admit as much when he writes that “[l]ike Basil and John Chrysostom, Thomas

Aquinas supposes that the preposition ‘through’ in John 1:3 must be understood *in light of what else the reader of the New Testament learns about the Trinity*” (Williams 2024, 41; emphasis added). Put another way, trinitarian ideas from elsewhere are calling the shots in the interpretation of John 1:3. But if the interpretation is founded upon simply false statements about the implication of the preposition “through,” and if it is motivated by considerations external to the text in question, then it seems very fair to accuse John’s and Thomas’s interpretation of being unnatural and purely dogmatically motivated. It is not plausibly what the evangelist could have meant. It is rather what John and Thomas and other pro-Nicene theologians *have* to make the evangelist’s words mean in order to reconcile them with Nicene theology, despite these words’ native connotations.

A reviewer raises this objection: couldn’t John and Thomas (and Williams) object that their alternative interpretations show that it’s at least *consistent* to assert that the Father creates the world through the Son *and* that Father and Son are consubstantial? *Respondeo*: Consistency is cheap. Any sentences *P* and *~P* can be made consistent by simply asserting that the person asserting *P* doesn’t really mean it, e.g. he has a gun to his head, or he’s speaking code, or he doesn’t know how to negate sentences, or he’s speaking on Opposite Day, or he’s using words idiosyncratically, etc. It’s still true that people in the ordinary case tend to mean what they say and to use words in their most common acceptations. In the normal case, to say that *A* does *x* through *B* implies that *A* does something *B* does not and *B* does something *A* does not, i.e. that *A* and *B* are non-consubstantial in the Nicene sense. It is very easy to give mundane and ordinary examples which show this meaning of “through.” It is not at all easy to present even one uncontroversial counterexample where the rule doesn’t apply. This provides very strong evidence against John and Thomas’s interpretation.⁴

⁴ The same reviewer objects that “Aquinas claims John was using ‘through’ because if he *simply* said the Son created the world, people might imagine just the sort of thing Nemes is imagining — that the Son ‘directly’ created without the Father being involved. So, he decided to say the Father created ‘through’ the Son, to make it more clear that there aren’t two distinct sources of creation.” *Respondeo*: This seems to me beside the point, because John can have reasons not to use both formulations. According to the Nicene doctrine, there is no divine action *ad extra* of which Father and Son are not equally its subjects. One cannot even literally say that the Father initiates while the Son obeys, since they are not distinct agents in that way. But to say that *A* does *x* through *B* normally implies that there is something *A* does which *B* does not and *vice versa*. That is why, if John really had the Nicene doctrine in mind, he would not be disposed to use the misleading word “through,” even if he would also have reason not to say simply that the Son created the world, because the preposition “through” would mislead about how the Father and Son relate to the action of creation.

Williams was certainly right to complain of my essay that it did not address historic examples of exegesis by pro-Nicene theologians. But now that some notable examples have been discussed, it seems that my original comments in my essay were correct. Nothing Basil says disproves my proposed rule about the implication of “through.” And contrary to John and Thomas, there is nothing about the preposition “through” that implies the begottenness of the Son as the one through whom the Father created the world or his consubstantiality with the Father himself. The word cannot mean that just because John and Thomas say so. One had might as well argue that Paul at 1 Cor. 15:4 means to say that Christ was not raised from the dead even though the word “not” (*ouk*) does not appear there. If the New Testament authors really did have the Nicene doctrine of consubstantiality in mind, they would never have used the word “through” to describe the Father’s and Son’s action of creating the world. And if one interprets them as saying that the Father created all things *through* the Son, then the fact that they use the word “through” strongly implies that they had no such notion in mind.

Letterism

Williams concludes his essay by summarizing the difference between my rule about the preposition “through” and the interpretations of Basil, John, and Thomas. He writes:

[W]hose exegesis of the New Testament is more plausible, Nemes’ or Basil and friends? Readers should be pressed by the latter given their more wide ranging and *literary* engagement with the New Testament with regard to prepositions said of the divine persons. But those who prefer “letterism, [which] is a wooden, thin interpretation that fails to go beyond the standard meanings of words and expressions (the locutions) or to discern the manner in which an author attends to these meanings (the illocutions),” might not (Williams 2024, 45; emphasis original; quoting Vanhoozer 1998, 311).

I am therefore said to be a “letterist” whereas Basil, John, and Thomas supposedly present a more comprehensive and literary interpretive approach.

It seems to me that this characterization of things is very much inadequate. On the one hand, nothing in Basil’s arguments against Aetius disproves my rule about the implications of the preposition “through” in sentences of the form “A does *x* through B.” My rule can furthermore be confirmed by appeal to a number of examples. Williams’s proposed counterexample about the pointing finger not only does not refute my rule but even illuminates it strongly. To say that one’s finger

points at something *through* its position relative to that object does indeed imply that one's finger is one thing and the finger's position is another. On the other hand, John's and Thomas's interpretation of John 1:3 is founded upon plainly false assertions about what significance the preposition "through" can have. The use of "through" in the assertion that the Father created all things through the Son has nothing to do with whether the Son is begotten or is consubstantial with the Father.

In light of all this evidence, it seems to me that my argument is successful or at the very least has not yet been refuted. The weight of the evidence seems to indicate that the proponent of the Nicene doctrine of the consubstantiality of Father and Son cannot accept the assertion that the Father created the world through the Son. To the extent that this latter assertion can be found in or implied by the New Testament texts, especially as interpreted by proponents of the early high Christology trend in recent New Testament studies, there is a serious logical conflict between the New Testament and pro-Nicene theology.

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