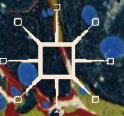




THE
AFFIRMATIONS
OF REASON

On Karl Barth's Speculative Theology

Sigurd Baark



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Sigurd Baark
University of Copenhagen
Copenhagen, Denmark

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For
The German Reformed Church of Copenhagen
Venite et ascendamus ad montem Domini et ad domum Dei Iacob
Isaiah 2:3

FOREWORD: KARL BARTH AND INTELLECTUAL THOUGHT

Among the questions asked with regard to Karl Barth's theology the last few decades, I consider the historian Rudy Koshar's one of the most pertinent: 'Where is Karl Barth in modern European history?'¹ Writing from the perspective of intellectual history, Koshar notes that Barth is usually presented either as the intellectual leader of the Confessional Church (*Bekennende Kirche*) in the struggle against National Socialism in Germany during the 1930s, or dismissed as a 'neo-orthodox' theologian with little to say about intellectual thought in general outside the realms of theology. While it may be true that Barth is among the thinkers in the twentieth Century who have generated more secondary literature than most—9910 items according to a 1992 bibliography²—sustained interest in Barth is found mainly if not solely within theology as an academic discipline. This circumstance belies the fact that Barth, within his German-speaking cultural realm and beyond, was not only a specialized theologian but also a public intellectual. Together with such luminaries as Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, Rudolf Bultmann, Ernst Cassirer, Martin Heidegger, Sigmund Freud, Edmund Husserl, Karl Jaspers, Franz Rosenzweig, Carl Schmitt and Max Weber, just to name a few, Barth was keenly interested in understanding his contemporary culture and society. Although he was using theology as his means for interpreting contemporary culture, at the

¹ Rudy Koshar, 'Where is Karl Barth in Modern European History?', *Modern Intellectual History*, 5:2 (2008), 333–62.

² Hans Markus Wildi, *Bibliographie Karl Barth, bd 2: Veröffentlichungen über Karl Barth* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1992).

same time he was a part of the broader critical conversation together with academics and intellectuals from other disciplines or realms. In other words, theology was not a compartmentalized reserve for theologians only, but part of the general conversation, and theologians generally considered themselves to be part of the public intellectual conversation. Barth was a central figure in his time.

To mention but one work initially, Barth's commentary on Paul's letter to the Romans (*Der Römerbrief* or *The Epistle to the Romans*, the second edition from 1922) did not merely radically transform theology—no little feat in itself—but also made an impact felt far beyond theology.³ This is the work that made him famous and earned him a chair; at the time of its conception he was working as a pastor in a Swiss village. The second edition from 1922 is actually a completely reworked version of the first edition from 1919; the approximately 500 pages of the first edition was replaced by another 500 pages three years later, as Barth thought that he had to say things differently this time around. Barth's commentary on the Romans is not simply a philological and historical explanation of the letter but an interpretation of it aimed at his own time. In a perhaps not coincidental parallel to the reformer Martin Luther 400 years earlier, Barth here signals a departure from a cultural Christianity that saw the Gospel as an extension of contemporary German culture and vice versa. Instead, the Gospel becomes a message of crisis for all human endeavors, especially all attempts to put a hyphen between 'culture' or 'politics'—in any of its forms, conservative, liberal or socialist—and 'Christianity'. This sense of living in a time of crisis, where 'all that is solid melts into air' to quote Marx and Engels, was a general sentiment among cultural critics at the time. It was a theme that Barth's *Romans* shared with other works at the time, for instance Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West* (1918–1922) or Ernst Bloch's *The Spirit of Utopia* (1918), although Barth's version of it rooted the crisis metaphor in theology. In his *Romans*, Barth turns out to be a reader of philosophy and literature as much as theology, and in terms of its influence, his book was also read by authors, philosophers and so on, and not only by theologians. *Romans* is content-wise, as well as stylistically, a very powerful, expressive work, directed against all forms of anthropocentrism, immanentism or Cultural Protestantism. As such, it undoubtedly

³Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, translated from the 6th ed. by Edwyn C. Hoskyns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968).

belongs to the classics of its age and deserves to be read among other such classics, be they historical, philosophical, psychological, sociological or theological.

Why has this only happened to a limited extent? Why is Karl Barth's *The Epistle to the Romans* usually read as a theological classic but not a cultural classic? One reason for this compartmentalization of theology is identified by Rudy Koshar as a 'secularistic bias' in intellectual history. As it has been taken for granted, because of some implicit version of the secularization thesis, that religion is on the way out, Barth and his works have often been sidestepped. Since he is a theologian, he *cannot*, per definition, have played any role as a public intellectual, at least not in the eyes of posterity. But this is not all: in comparison to Barth's time, we are also the victims of an increasing academic specialization, meaning that theologians write about other theologians, philosophers about other philosophers and so on. This means that the general, public discussion that Barth was a part of has been made doubly invisible. However, as the secularization thesis lately has been modified or questioned, the secularistic bias is slowly disappearing. Barth's theology as well as theology in general is increasingly seen as an important aspect of the intellectual history of the recently passed century—although there might be an aspect of theology's own compartmentalization that still needs to be overcome.

Given, then, that Koshar's question about the place of Barth in European history is pertinent, there is also another question that should be asked, which is at least as important, namely, 'where is Karl Barth in contemporary intellectual thought?' Given that Barth's theology has an important place in modern European intellectual history alongside other intellectual achievements, one may well ask whether Barth's theology also might have some continuing relevance for our own times. It is interesting to note how many of the intellectual authorships from the early part of the twentieth Century are considered to have precisely that. Imagine contemporary thought today without such names as those in my list above—Benjamin, Bloch, Bultmann, Cassirer, Heidegger, Freud, Husserl, Jaspers, Rosenzweig, Schmitt and Weber—not only as historical authors but also as interlocutors for current thought: without them you will imagine an impoverished discussion. Perhaps, then, Barth, among all these other intellectuals, does not belong only in history but in the current intellectual discussion.

There have been some obstacles to considering Barth's place in the general intellectual discussion that are internal to theology and that has to do with labeling him a 'neo-orthodox' theologian. In a dramatic and

drastic form this sentiment is expressed by the Swedish author and priest Rune Pär Olofsson in the header of an article in an evening newspaper, as a characterization of Barth's theology: 'God is everything, human beings are nothing, and you are an idiot...'.⁴ What Olofsson summarizes in this witty but still unsatisfactory header is Barth's talk of God as the 'Wholly Other' that hits us human beings 'right from above' ('senkrecht von oben'). Taken at its face value, this idea, from the second edition of *The Epistle to the Romans*, seems to be the worst kind of 'revelatory positivism' and aiming at an outright destruction of human subjectivity. Of course, Olofsson's article has not affected the reception of Barth's theology at all, with the possibility of an exception in Sweden, but nevertheless similar sentiments (in less dramatic forms) has turned some of theology against Barth. Especially, then, if such an impression of Barth's theology were to be true, it is not a likely candidate for a critical conversation with philosophy, psychology, sociology and other disciplines.

What such a characterization of Barth's theology does not recognize, however, is how the idea of God as the 'Wholly Other' that strikes us 'right from above' should be interpreted with regard to Barth's more general concept of crisis and thus as more dialectical than what just an out-of-context quote might suggest. Barth's theology is an act of self-relativization as much as a relativization of other positions; thus it is more of an intervention than a position. In other words, Barth is trying to phrase something similar to many other thinkers at the time, namely the insight that there is an innate tendency of human thought and action to go astray and only a radically critical thought that recognizes this tendency is sufficient. In that sense, Barth shares some of the insights of, say, Marxism or psychoanalysis about the fundamental alienation of human beings. One might say that the compartmentalization of theology mentioned above plays a trick here, as it veils some of the echoes between theology and other forms of thought that otherwise might be obvious. Now, even if the idea that lies behind Barth's conception of the 'Wholly Other' in *Romans* might be more complex than some of his interpreters seem to think, he nevertheless moved on, to his magnum opus, *Kirchliche Dogmatik* or *Church Dogmatics*, a work of more than 9000 pages, published between 1932 and 1967, where his original idea of crisis is modified and deepened but not

⁴Rune Pär Olofsson, 'Gud är allt, människan intet och du är en idiot...', *Expressen*, November 10 (1964).

abandoned.⁵ The length of this work alone gives us a hint about why the interpretation of Barth requires an effort comparable to what it takes to understand Karl Marx or Sigmund Freud.

What some theologians have seen as an obstacle to the reception of Barth's thought in theology as well as more generally, others have seen as an asset to a genuinely critical discussion. There has been a steady trickle of articles, books and dissertations comparing Barth to Martin Buber, Edmund Husserl, Luce Irigaray, Emmanuel Lévinas and Jacques Derrida, among others. The common denominator between these different works is the recognition of the critical and dialectical aspect of Barth's thought which makes it interesting to compare to philosophers or philosophies paralleling a similar trait. Juxtaposing the philosopher and the theologian might accomplish a mutually critical elucidation of the one and the other, but also serves to highlight why Barth is not to be regarded as some kind of anti-philosopher. Reading Sigurd Baark's Ph.D. dissertation *Seeking out the Enemy on His own Ground—problems and proof in dialectical theology* around the time of its defense, two things struck me immediately. First, that I had never read this kind of comparison between G. W. F. Hegel and Barth before, but that it made complete sense. Second, I also sensed that Baark's interpretation of what is to be understood by 'dialectics' has really clarified this central aspect of Barth's theology. Building upon earlier works by his supervisor in Princeton, Bruce McCormack, but also the Danish theologian Bent Flemming Nielsen, but taking them further, Baark clearly shows how Barth, far from being the 'revelatory positivist' he has been accused of, belongs among the speculative philosophers of German Idealism.⁶ Through his dissertation, Baark made a significant contribution to the stream of studies recognizing the potential of Barth's thought for a genuine contribution to our contemporary critical discussion about culture and society as well as religion.

In his current book, *The Affirmations of Reason*, Baark builds upon his dissertation in explaining this speculative aspect of Barth's theology, thus bringing him into the contemporary intellectual discussion. In an exemplary way, Baark opens up the hitherto little explored avenue between

⁵Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 13 vol., eds. T. F. Torrance and G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1936–1969).

⁶Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909–1936* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Bent Flemming Nielsen, *Die Rationalität der Offenbarungstheologie: Die Struktur des Theologieverständnisses von Karl Barth* (Århus: Aarhus University Press, 1988).

German Idealism and Barth's theology for the broader discussion of the relationship between philosophy and theology. If, as I have suggested, two of the more important questions in contemporary Barth-studies is about Barth's place in modern European history as well as his place in contemporary intellectual thought, *The Affirmations of Reason* is a significant contribution to both of these questions, the first more implicitly than the other. But it would be limiting to characterize this work as a contribution to Barth-studies only—the topic of reason is central to the conversations between (and in) philosophy and theology in general. Given, moreover, that Barth was a thinker as interested in the current state of society as he was of philosophy or theology in a more abstract sense, the theme of reason seems to be as important to the current state of *our* society as it was in Barth's own time. No doubt there is much in Baark's thesis about Barth as a speculative theologian to discuss, but whatever position we finally might take with regard to Barth's theology after reading his book, we owe it to Baark for opening up new avenues for thought as well as revitalizing our current conversation.

Gothenburg, Sweden

Ola Sigurdson

CONTENTS

1	Introduction	1
2	The Speculative Aspect	7
Part I German Idealism		31
3	Kant's Critical Philosophy	33
4	Fichte and Hegel on Knowledge and Self-Consciousness	69
Part II From Dialectical to Speculative Theology		113
5	The Early Dialectical Theology of Barth and Thurneysen	115
6	The Form of Barth's Speculative Theology	171
7	Barth's Speculative Theology and the <i>Kirchliche Dogmatik</i>	231
8	Conclusion	279
	Index	285

Introduction

This book is about theology. Specifically, it is about how one does theology. Even more specifically, it is about how Karl Barth does theology. I freely admit that I believe that the way Karl Barth does theology is the only sensible way to do theology today. I cannot exclude the possibility that someone might one day convince me otherwise, but thus far no one has. For me, then, coming to understand how Barth does theology is coming to understand how doing theology is as much as possible today.

In this book I argue that there is an essentially speculative aspect to Barth's theology. I argue that if one focuses on this speculative aspect and determines how it comes about and what its consequences are, one will get to the heart of Barth's theology and thus understand its basic "mechanism." Furthermore, I argue that seeing this aspect opens up new conversations. First, it opens up a conversation about Barth's relationship with German Idealism. It seems that German Idealism is once more in vogue, which means that noticing this aspect of Barth's theology opens up another conversation about the relationship between his work and our contemporary intellectual situation.

To formulate the title of this book, *The Affirmations of Reason*, I use the old rhetorical trick of playing with the subjective and objective genitive. It is meant to suggest that Karl Barth's theology is characterized by a fundamental affirmation of our capacity to reason as self-conscious subjects—and that this capacity is brought within a particular logic of affirmation that excludes even the thought of the nonexistence of God. In other

words, in light of God's revelation in Jesus Christ the self-conscious human subject cannot *not* affirm the sovereign existence of the free and loving God as unconditional.

The book is roughly divided into two parts. The first part tells the story of how the self-conscious human subject assumes the place that it does in modern thought. It is essentially the story of the development of German Idealism from Kant to Hegel. The second part tells the story of how Barth's theology both affirms and reforms our understanding of the self-conscious human subject within the praxis of theology. This is where I develop the notion that Barth is a speculative theologian. It was important to trace the development of German Idealism in some detail to emphasize that we cannot dispense with the essential insights of that great philosophical movement. In my view Barth is the theologian who has seen this most clearly, and, since I wanted to do him justice, I had to do them justice as well. That is what I have tried to do—in some detail.

The first part of the book is thus not directly concerned with theology. I suggest that readers who do not feel the need to run through the conceptual development of the nexus of self-consciousness, reason, and freedom in German Idealism go directly to the second part, on Barth's theology, after having read the second chapter. This is not to suggest that the second part could stand alone. The book was written as a whole, and each step was important and shaped what came after. To avoid confusion, however, I am simply pointing out that the full-blooded theology is found in Chaps. 5, 6, and 7.

I also want to say something about my use of the term "speculative theology" to prevent misunderstanding. This concept has had two distinct, if related, uses. It can denote a particular way of doing theology that roughly resembles that of philosophy. A figure such as Anselm of Canterbury has been described as a speculative theologian in this sense of the term. It can also denote the theology practiced by the mediating theologians of the nineteenth century—theologians who worked in light of the philosophy of the German Idealists. I take both uses to reveal something important about the concept. In this book, I argue for a third aspect or use of the concept, which is explicit in Hegel and implicit in Barth. For Hegel, speculative thought denotes the form of knowledge as knowledge.¹ That is, speculative knowledge is immune to attacks by skepticism and doubt—it is absolute. Something very similar goes for Barth's account of the

¹See for example G. W. F. Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften I* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970), 52, 93, and 176–9 in particular.

knowledge of God that we can acquire in faith. While I invoke the two more conventional senses of “speculative theology,” I add this third aspect concerning the certain form of our knowledge. In other words, Barth’s theology is also speculative because it is immune to the usual forms of relativism, skepticism, and subjectivism that have marred the discipline of theology. In the end, I think, this third aspect provides an essential link that enables us to hold the two somewhat distinct if more established senses of the concept together in a more intuitive way.

I am aware that it may be considered provocative to call Barth’s theology speculative. I am not particularly worried about that. Throughout I insist that Barth’s theology is essentially grounded in the deeply Protestant praxis of reading and rereading the Biblical scriptures. This is the measure of any legitimate, speculative theology: it is ultimately a form of reading, a way of understanding and obeying the inner structuring logic of the biblical texts. Anything that departs from this grounding praxis immediately ceases to be theology and becomes poor philosophy, anthropology, or theosophy. It immediately becomes open to doubt and thus ceases to be speculative in the sense in which I develop the concept in light of Hegel and Barth. In this sense, all theology is essentially practical and biblical.

This practical aspect is what I love most about Barth’s theology. The *Kirchliche Dogmatik* occupies nine thousand pages of unfinished dogmatic theology. It is incredibly stringent and employs sharp criteria for judging what can and cannot count as a legitimate theological insight. It is unfinished because theology cannot end. As a living praxis, there is always more to say. We can always read the biblical texts again and discover something new and challenging that overturns our previous assumptions, requires a sharper formulation or a clearer distinction. Thank God for that.

In 2013 I defended my Ph.D. dissertation, “Seeking out the Enemy on His own Ground – Problems and Proof in Dialectical Theology,” at Princeton Theological Seminary. In a way, this book begins where my dissertation left off. According to Hegel, when one thinks dialectically one has yet to grasp knowledge as knowledge. Once one has understood that the form of knowing must be absolute, one begins to think speculatively. Whether I accomplish the latter is certainly an open question, but I do see a clear progression in my own theological thinking, which is reflected in the titles of the dissertation and this book. There is, of course, a conceptual continuum between the two texts (how could there not be?), but as far as I know there is an overlap of only about one-and-a-half paragraphs on Hegel’s treatment of judgment.

I was very privileged to write my dissertation with Dr. Bruce L. McCormack as my *doktorvater*. Anyone who knows his work will immediately recognize his influence on my thinking. In his classic study, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909–1936*, he argued that Barth must be understood in light of the work of the German Idealists. He argued that the most fruitful way to approach Barth was to ask the epistemological question: how does Barth know what he claims to know? He argued that to understand this one must engage with his early theology in detail, and determine how it fits with Barth's 1931 book on Anselm of Canterbury. He argued that Barth's doctrine of election was the culmination of Barth's development as a theologian. In all this, I remain a student of McCormack and follow his lead. Now, within this framework, I find myself arguing against many of McCormack's specific positions, but that is how it ought to be between master and student. How boring it would be, if there was nothing more to say. The aim is for students to think for themselves. On this point too, I am a very grateful student of Bruce McCormack.

Throughout my work on Barth, I have had the great privilege to be in constant conversation with dr. teol, Bent Flemming Nielsen. Again, anyone who knows his work will also recognize his influence on my thinking. His book, *Die Rationalität der Offenbarungstheologie*, is one of the most insightful studies of Barth that I have ever read. Taking someone else's thoughts beyond what they themselves have written and said is a subtle form of criticism. That is how Hegel, in his subtler moments, critiques Kant. In this sense, my book is a thorough critique of Bent Flemming Nielsen's lovely reading of Barth, written with deep gratitude.

I owe a special debt of gratitude to Dr. John R. Bowlin. Dr. Bowlin is one of the liveliest and most intelligent theologians I have ever encountered. As anyone who knows him will agree, he embodies the noblest academic virtues.

I want to thank Dr. Ola Sigurdson for his continued support and encouragement. He has been an ideal interlocutor since I returned to Denmark four years ago. There are few dialectical theologians in Scandinavia, and I count myself very lucky to have come to know this engaging and insightful fellow traveler. I am grateful to all his colleagues and the Ph.D. students in the department of Literature, History of Ideas, and Religion at the University of Gothenburg, who have been great conversation partners and critics these last four years.

As I was writing the book, the Faculty of Theology at the University of Copenhagen offered me a position as associate researcher in the Department

of Systematic Theology. Working at the Faculty of Theology has made all the difference. I am very grateful to the dean, dr. teol Kirsten Busch Nielsen, for her help and support. I am also incredibly grateful to all my wonderful colleagues at the Department of Systematic Theology, especially the department chair, Dr. Johanne Stubbe Teglbjerg Kristensen, who has been both a great supporter and an insightful critic of my work on Barth.

Several colleagues and friends have accompanied my thinking and writing along the way. Dr. Yoshiyuki Kato helped shape the thoughts that became this book. Without whom not. Dr. Anthony Feneuil read and discussed several of my chapters along the way, which has always helped me see things more clearly and formulate my thoughts more effectively. Dr. Lars Nørgaard and I have discussed how to do (and not do) theology for over sixteen years. I am privileged to have such a knowledgeable and quick-witted man as my friend. I want to thank Pastor Caspar Wenzel Tornøe for all our lovely, long, and symphonic talks on speculative theology and I. A. Dorner. Pastor Thomas Emil Hornemann Thielcke has been an ecclesial voice of reason throughout my writing and has helped me never lose sight of the true purpose of theology: to serve the Church.

I am also grateful to the Copenhagen association of psychoanalysts at Freuds Agora. The discussions there provided an intellectual community when it was truly needed. I am also very grateful to Dr. Salvatore F. Guido of New York. I want to thank Dr. William E. Barnett of WordCraft Editing & Writing Services for all his help throughout the years. I also want to thank my editor at Palgrave Macmillan, Phillip Getz, and his assistant editor, Amy Invernizzi, for their help and support.

My family has supported me throughout. My parents, Lisbet Rasmussen and Erik Baark, have been the most engaged, supportive, and loving parents one could wish for. I love you both. The enormous breadth of knowledge, keen mind, and loving friendship of my sister and colleague, Josefine Baark, continues to inspire me. Thank you, sister!

My wife, Kimberly Martin Hendler, has loved, supported, and kept me sane for nine years. I am grateful to your family for the love and support they have given you and me through this process. I love you, Kim, you make me free. Together we had our beautiful son, Oliver Hendler Baark, who has accompanied this book all his little life. His love provided a refuge, not least by demanding my full attention and by not being this book. Thank you, son.

Finally, I write and think as a pastor in the German Reformed Church in Copenhagen. I am eternally grateful to my senior colleague, Pastor Axel Bargheer, and to the entire presbyterium, Jytte, Sten, Wera, and Anette,

for the love and support that they have shown me throughout this process. I am deeply grateful to the entire congregation for their continued care and encouragement.

This book is dedicated to the German Reformed Church in Copenhagen.

Venite et ascendamus ad montem Domini et ad domum Dei Iacob. (Isaiah 2:3)

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The Speculative Aspect

We seek the absolute everywhere and only ever find things.
Novalis

A. *Aller Anfang ist schwer*, as they say in Germany. I hope to make things easier by beginning with Ludwig Wittgenstein.

In *Culture and Value* Wittgenstein explicitly addresses what he takes to be the cornerstone of Karl Barth's theological project. In one of the aphorisms on religious language from 1950 he writes: "A theology which insists on the use of *certain particular* words and phrases, and outlaws others, does not make anything clearer (Karl Barth). It gesticulates with words, as one might say, because it wants to say something and does not know how to express it. *Practice* gives the words their sense."¹ Wittgenstein's remarks are clearly critical. He points to an apparent arbitrariness at the heart of Karl Barth's theological reflections. As Wittgenstein reads him, Barth meticulously seeks to restrict a particular form of language, theological language, but he seems to be unwilling or, worse, unable, to clearly explain why this critical demarcation is useful or what practical difference it might make.

The critique aims at a familiar and important aspect of the writings of the so-called dialectical theologians. One of the characteristic marks of the change that took place in theology in Germany after the First World War was the reemergence of a particular theological, doctrinal vocabulary that

¹Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), 85.

had almost univocally been declared archaic and unhelpful just a few years prior. Paradigmatically, a particular “liberal” vocabulary was replaced by a largely “orthodox” doctrinal vocabulary.

Now Wittgenstein’s point is that this change in nomenclature did not make anything any clearer. Rather, he suggests, it is an instance of the pseudo-change that often takes place in the name of human progress. What would be truly significant would be a practical difference, a difference in how we actually make use of theological language in relation to our concrete ability to account for our intentions, and even reshape our values. A change that remains at the level of nomenclature masks the fact that at the practical level everything remains largely the same. In Wittgenstein’s view, Barth’s theological project signals such a semblance of progress; it exemplifies the critical observation made by Johann Nestroy that introduces *Philosophical Investigations*: “Überhaupt hat der Fortschritt das an sich, dass er viel grosser aussieht, als er wirklich ist.”

For my purpose here, it is not of definitive importance whether Wittgenstein’s critique as it applies to Barth is well founded. What *is* important is that Wittgenstein’s critique presents us with a specific question that allows us to address an interesting aspect of Barth’s theology. The question is: how is the particular relationship between practice and theory in Barth’s theology conceived such that it might legitimately result in the privileging of one particular set of theoretical, theological terms over another? In other words, is there a way of approaching Barth’s theology that brings out the practical reasons for selecting one particular meta-vocabulary rather than another? Answering this question allows us to determine whether Barth’s work might, in fact, signal the kind of progress in theological reflection that Wittgenstein would recognize as a legitimate advance.²

Underscoring the practical presupposition of theological, theoretical reflection is not foreign to Barth. We are, at least to some extent, following in his footsteps. In an important, programmatic passage towards the end of *Der Römerbrief II* from 1922, he writes: “No ‘praxis’ *alongside* the theory is recommended here; rather, it is ascertained that even the ‘theory’ with which we have hitherto been concerned is *the theory of praxis*.”³ This “theory of praxis” forms the essential substance of this book.

²This is not, of course, to say that Wittgenstein’s view of what constitutes legitimate progress in a given field of inquiry is the only relevant standard. There might be other ways of measuring innovation and change, but for our purposes here Wittgenstein’s approach provides a nice starting point.

³Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 2011), 450.

Because I want to examine the “theory of praxis” that structures Barth’s theology, when it comes to Barth’s *oeuvre* I have a particular *terminus a quo* and a particular *terminus ad quem* in mind. Barth’s thinking develops over time and I am after the most basic mechanics that drive the engine of his thought as well as its most developed and sophisticated form. In terms of Barth’s texts, my starting point is his second commentary on Paul’s *Romans* from 1922, and the last text I examine in detail is the *Kirchliche Dogmatik* II,2 from 1942. My aim is to show that by then Barth has developed what is best described as a practically grounded, Protestant “speculative theology.”

B. It will be helpful here to introduce a notion that plays an essential part in answering the question(s) I posed above concerning the relationship between doctrinal vocabulary and theological praxis. I want to account for how we move from practice to theory and back again. We want to understand why the reflecting theologian draws certain theoretical distinctions based on his or her practice. In asking how this happens we have already implicitly presupposed a particular form of life: the self, or, in more technical terms, the self-conscious subject. It is this “theologically engaged” subject (Barth the *theologian*) who—by means of his texts—is asked to account for himself and his mediation of his thoughts, intentions, and acts.

In his superb book *Self-Consciousness*, Sebastian Rödl writes: “An inquiry into self-consciousness, then, is an inquiry into a form of knowledge, which is knowledge of oneself as oneself.”⁴ As we progress, we will have to consider whether the particular knowledge that the dialectical theologian has of herself as herself when engaged in the praxis of theology differs from other forms of knowledge that one has of oneself as oneself. Is there a way in which we can delineate the practically engaged theological subject and differentiate it from other forms of engaged subjectivity?

Rödl has also reminded us that reason, freedom, and self-consciousness are intertwined ideas and that we cannot examine one without implicating the other two. The German Idealists were the first to engage this nexus in a systematic way.⁵ An important part of what is at stake in the present study is an analysis of the relationship between Karl Barth’s theology and the tradition of German Idealism. This means studying how the nexus of reason, freedom, and self-consciousness is affirmed (perhaps, even advanced)

⁴Sebastian Rödl, *Self-Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), vii.

⁵“It is the principal thought of German Idealism that self-consciousness, freedom, and reason are one.” Rödl, *Self-Consciousness*, 105.

in the particular form of theory and practice that shapes Barth's theology from *Der Römerbrief II* onwards.

In order to distinguish my approach from other ways of engaging with Barth's texts, I have found it useful to invoke the concept of "speculative theology." Commonly, the concept has served to denote the work of the particular group of theologians who more or less explicitly engaged with the philosophical issues and problems that were raised by the German Idealists. While this particular understanding generally aligns with how I would like to use the concept, I nevertheless want to suggest that there is more to speculative theology than this.

In his work *Thetische Theologie*, which seeks to outline the principles for a constructive, systematic theology, Peter Widmann reminds us that "...[d]ie Ergründung von allumfassenden Strukturnotwendigkeiten heißt seit alters *Spekulation*."⁶ Exploring how and why it is structurally necessary to affirm certain theological terms and phrases and deny the usefulness of others is, in this more comprehensive sense, to engage in "speculative theology." In other words, when we use expressions and concepts which are primarily appropriate to objects that are not God in order to speak about God, provisionally judging some expressions and concepts to be more appropriate for this purpose than others, our theology is in an important sense "speculative."

In the philosophy of the German Idealist, G. W. F. Hegel, speculative thought denotes the highest form of knowing.⁷ Dialectical thinking remains tied to skepticism, where as speculative thinking is inherently affirmative. As Hegel puts it: "The *Speculative* or *Positive-Rational* takes up the unity of the determinations in their opposition, the *Affirmative*, which is contained in their dissolution and their passing."⁸ When we come to understand that the form of our knowing is certain and leaves no room for skepticism—what Hegel calls "absolute knowing"—we leave the dialectical form of reflection behind and begin to think speculatively. In the end, I argue that something remarkably similar takes place in Barth's theology.

By describing Barth's theology as "speculative" I am, in fact, following in his footsteps. In another important programmatic passage, this time from his book on Anselm of Canterbury's proof of the necessity of

⁶ Peter Widmann, *Thetische Theologie* (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1982), 124.

⁷ See for example G. W. F. Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften I*, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970), 52, 93, and 176–9 in particular.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 176.

affirming the existence of God, *Fides Quaerens Intellectum*, from 1931, he writes: “God shatters every syllogism. But just as everything which is not God could not exist apart from God and is something only because of God, with increasing intensity an *aliqua imitation illius essentiae*, so it is possible for expressions which are really appropriate only to objects that are not identical with God, to be true expressions, *per aliquam similitudinem aut imaginem (ut cum vultum alicuius consideramus in speculo)*, even when these expressions are applied to the God who can never be expressed. *Not all ‘speculative’ theology says what is true. But even theology which does say what is true is still ‘speculative’ theology. Theology can neither avoid nor ignore the fact of being thus conditioned; nor ought this make it ashamed.*”⁹ It is this affirmation of “speculative theology” that I take up in order to show how Barth’s theology makes use of and addresses core problems, issues, and insights from the tradition of German Idealism.

If someone were to suggest that this could be described as “the theological problem of analogy” that would be fine by me—as long as he or she would, in turn, acknowledge that by Barth’s own lights “speculative theology” will do just as well. And furthermore, the term “speculative theology” has the additional merit of calling to mind the abovementioned nexus of reason, freedom, and self-consciousness.

This is not the only way to understand Barth’s theology. I want to suggest that it is however a very fruitful way of understanding his theology and that it explicitly brings together a set of questions, concepts, and conversation partners that are essential to a full understanding of what Barth wants to say and do. In other words, it is a particularly useful way of getting to the core of his theological project—and especially useful for understanding what his theology might tell us today.

Approaching Barth’s texts from this angle is then to engage with *an aspect* of his theology. By this I mean that once it is recognized, it appears as an actual and irreducible part of what shapes his theological project. In order to make this point clearer, Wittgenstein can help us out once more. In part two of *Philosophical Investigations* he makes a distinction between “seeing that” and “seeing as.” He writes: “I contemplate a face, and then suddenly notice its likeness to another. I *see* that it has not changed; and yet I see it differently. I call this experience ‘noticing an aspect’.”¹⁰ He uses

⁹Karl Barth, *Fides Quaerens Intellectum* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1960), 30 (emphasis mine).

¹⁰Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 2001), 164.

the example of the image of the “duck–rabbit”, which can be seen as both a rabbit (from the right) and a duck (from the left). The interesting thing is how our perception of an object changes without anything materially changing in the object itself. “The expression of a change in aspect is the expression of a *new* perception and at the same time of the perception being unchanged.”¹¹

This is where I want to draw an analogy to my approach to Barth’s speculative theology. The analogy turns on the insight that once it is recognized that the image might be seen as either a duck or a rabbit, it no longer makes sense to deny that it is a picture of either a rabbit or a duck. After the dawning of an aspect, the potential uses of the image have automatically multiplied. There are contexts and practical purposes in which one aspect might make more sense than another, but it remains one among an expanded set of possibilities contained in the picture. And I want to claim that there are practical purposes for which approaching Barth’s work from the aspect of “speculative theology” makes a lot of sense.¹² If I manage to show that this is right, I have also shown that there is something genuinely “new” in Barth’s work, understood in the sense of Wittgenstein’s critique.¹³

C. Now calling Barth a “speculative theologian” is bound to seem counterintuitive to many of his contemporary readers. Barth does explicitly use the concept “speculative theology” in an affirmative way in the quote above, but there are many other places in his work where he sounds much more skeptical, if not explicitly negative, note when writing about “speculation.” Furthermore, I have drawn the quote from the *Fides Quaerens Intellectum*, which has been the subject of some controversy in the field of “Barth studies.” I will address the second issue concerning the status of the *Fides Quaerens Intellectum* first, and then return to the second issue concerning the use of “speculation” as such in Barth’s theology.

¹¹ Ibid., 167.

¹² Of course, there are purposes for which it is less useful and purposes for which it is more useful. I could imagine that it is less useful for the purpose of pastoral care, than for addressing the issue of the relationship between exegesis and doctrinal constructs.

¹³ For Wittgenstein there is an important relationship between the dawning of an “aspect” and an actual breakthrough in a given discipline. As he writes in *Culture and Value* in an aphorism from 1931: “Das eigentliche Verdienst eines Kopernikus oder Darwin war nicht die Entdeckung einer wahren Theorie, sondern eines fruchtbaren neuen Aspekt.” Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 18.

In the *Fides Quaerens Intellectum* Barth takes up Anselm of Canterbury's (in-) famous proof of the existence of God from the *Proslogion*, Chaps. 2, 3, and 4. The controversy in "Barth studies" turns on a quote from the preface to the second edition. There Barth wrote: "Only a comparatively few commentators ... have realized that my interest in Anselm was never a side-issue for me or—assuming I am more or less correct in my historical interpretation of St. Anselm—realized how much it has influenced me or been absorbed into my own thinking. Most of them have completely failed to notice that in this book on Anselm I am working with a vital key, if not the key, to an understanding of the whole process of thought that has impressed me more and more in my *Church Dogmatics* as the only one proper to theology."¹⁴

In his 1995 intellectual biography of Karl Barth, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, Bruce McCormack argued that Barth's account of the importance of the *Fides Quaerens Intellectum* above was not a reliable interpretation of his own theological method. McCormack argued that to understand the core of Barth's theology is to understand that Barth is committed to a form of theological "Realism." God is real and God's revealing presence in the man Jesus is real; fleshing out this fundamental conviction is what drives Barth's theology.¹⁵ The apparent

¹⁴ Barth, *Fides Quaerens*, 11.

¹⁵ A few comments on McCormack's "Realism": it is not given that McCormack's theological "Realism" coincides with the current use of the concept "Realism" in the discipline of philosophy. McCormack uses Immanuel Kant's distinction between things as they appear and things-in-themselves to argue that "true reality" is beyond the reach of human thought. See Bruce McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 140, 141. He implies that something's being "objective" means that it stands completely outside the scope of human conceptual mediation. "Objectively real," as McCormack understands it, means beyond the reach of our conceptual faculties (and so not inter-subjective) as well as beyond the realm of appearances in space and time: "a standpoint lying beyond this world, history, and human possibilities" (130). "Reality" is not to be equated with our everyday experience of the world and the things in it (chairs, tables, etc.). McCormack denies that this reality beyond appearance and experience is "ideal": it is neither an ideal (formal, conceptual) nor an appearance or an experienced object. In light of these negative definitions, what does it mean to be "objectively real"? McCormack implies that something is "real" when viewed "from God's position." He argues that Barth attempts to "think from a standpoint lying in God Himself and therefore, from a standpoint lying beyond this world, history, and human possibility." (130). We are presented with a limited, human, conceptual sphere on one side and a non-conceptual "reality" on the other, and then have to describe how these two distinct spheres match up from some third point of view, which is neither that of human concept-users nor that of "reality" (God): a

contradiction between God as eternal and infinite divine being and God given as an object in space and time and thus locatable within the sphere constituted by the transcendental ideality of our forms of intuition (as the philosopher Immanuel Kant would have it) is explained by a *real* dialectic or “*Realdialektik*” immanent to the very being of God.¹⁶ When Barth appears to use a “dialectical method,” he is actually describing the objective reality of God’s revealed being as simply and plainly as possible. Therefore the phrase “dialectical *method*” is secondary, perhaps even a misnomer, when we want to categorize Barth’s theological approach. Barth’s seemingly “dialectical approach” springs from his unwavering commitment to dogmatic realism.¹⁷ McCormack concludes that since there is next to no evidence of such a fundamental commitment to realism (or *Realdialektik*) in *Fides Quaerens Intellectum*, Barth’s account of his own theological method cannot be correct.

The question is whether Barth’s theology is in fact determined by a *Realdialektik*. The concept of *Realdialektik* appears very few times in Barth’s work. When *Realdialektik* is mentioned by Barth or his close associates it is, for example, in the context of the doctrine of the holy angels, or in a puzzled letter from Eduard Thurneysen from the early twenties, where he asks Barth if he can help him make any sense of the concept.¹⁸

“view-from-nowhere,” which invokes a position that we cannot occupy (neither human nor divine; not conceptually mediated, but apparently thinkable, describable). This entails beginning from positive accounts of knowledge that it is difficult to see how we could obtain (an immediate divine position). McCormack’s realism sounds distinctly Platonic. “The truly ‘real’ is the wholly otherness of the *Self*-revealing God in comparison with whom the empirical world is mere shadow and appearance” (130). The main difference appears to be that Plato presents positive philosophical arguments for the existence of this supersensible reality, whereas McCormack invokes a “Kantian” distinction between “appearance” and “reality,” subtracts appearance, and posits that the remainder is “objectively real reality.”

¹⁶ McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Dialectical Theology*, 18.

¹⁷ “[M]aterial questions in dogmatics are seen to control and determine the shape of the development. Whatever changes occurred in Barth’s method were simply a reflex of decisions made in areas of eschatology, Christology and the doctrine of election. From a genetic point of view, those material questions have to be regarded as having decisive importance”; McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Dialectical Theology*, 23. Barth’s theological development is thus measured by how successful he is at making orthodox dogmatic formulations correspond to the extra-conceptual reality of God’s revelation and being.

¹⁸ “Verstehts du, was da gemeint ist mit dieser merkwürdigen neuen realen Dialektik?” Karl Barth, *Karl Barth Gesamtausgabe: Karl Barth – Eduard Thurneysen Briefwechsel, Band II: 1921–1930* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1974), 178. Karl Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik IV,3* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1980), 486.

Apart from these few references to the concept in and around the first generation of dialectical theologians, there are no other mentions of it in Barth's work and no signs of a systematic use of it in defining the driving force of his theological project. On closer look, it is difficult to make sense of the concept of *Realdialektik*, and McCormack does not help his readers, since he never provides them with a thorough account of its actual sense or its strange history.¹⁹ This being the case, I think there is room for some skepticism about whether a commitment to "*Realdialektik*" is the best way to describe the underlying structure of Barth's theology and its development.²⁰

Most readers of Barth would agree that much hinges on how we should understand Barth's relationship with Immanuel Kant's critical philosophy. Here McCormack's interpretation of the relationship has been very influential. His take on Barth as a theological realist essentially rests on a particular construal of what Barth takes away from having read Kant. According to McCormack, the principal Kantian thought that Barth

¹⁹ In the secondary literature on Barth's theology, the concept of *Realdialektik* first appears in Micheal Beintker's book on the role of dialectics in Barth's dialectical theology, which is where McCormack encounters it and subsequently takes it over. Michael Beintker, *Die Dialektik in der 'Dialektischen Theologie' Karl Barths* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1987), 31. Beintker takes the concept from Alwin Diemer's basic introduction to philosophical dialectics in the series, *Elementarkurs Philosophie*. Alwin Diemer, *Elementarkurs Philosophie – Dialektik* (Vienna: Econ Verlag, 1976). In this book Diemer expands on *Realdialektik* twice (122 and 130–1). He discusses it in greatest detail in his account of the philosophy of the Schopenhauer disciple, Julius Bahnsen, whose largely incoherent book on the topic is now forgotten. There is a further mention in his account of the writings of Nikolai Hartmann, whose work has suffered much the same fate. See also Julius Bahnsen, *Der Widerspruch in Wissen und Wesen der Welt* (Leipzig: Th. Grieben's Verlag, 1882) and Nicolai Hartmann, "Hegel und das Problem der Realdialektik", in *Kleinere Schriften* (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter & Co., 1957). Throughout its history, the sense of the concept has appeared to be either largely obscure or downright contradictory.

²⁰ McCormack defines *Realdialektik* as "a dialectical relationship between two magnitudes or states of affairs which are objectively real prior to human knowledge of them" (*Karl Barth's Dialectical Theology*, 270). How are we to understand this definition of "dialectic"? Take a mountain and a valley on a planet in an uninhabited solar system in a parallel galaxy as "two magnitudes" that are "objectively real prior" to our knowledge of them. What does it mean to describe their relation as "dialectical"? Conceptually, there is an analytical relationship between a mountain and a valley, but what would it mean to subtract the conceptual form of this relation and then speak of a "dialectic"? McCormack also invokes the notion of "a static dialectic" (269). Again, the use of the term "dialectic" seems misplaced here: how can two things that do not interact be in a "dialectical" relationship? On a careful reading it becomes very hard to make sense of one of McCormack's core explanatory terms.

accepts is the abovementioned transcendental ideality of space and time and the forms of the understanding, i.e., the basic framework of the *Critique of Pure Reason*.²¹ Since for us to have knowledge of objects they must appear in spatiotemporal form, God must, in order to make himself known to us, become a determinate object of experience within the coordinates of spatiotemporal extension—potentially subject to concrete measurement, so to speak. Thus McCormack's Barth is not particularly concerned with Kant's practical philosophy; instead he accepts the entire framework of Kant's theoretical philosophy and views its account of the structure of human knowledge as a given.²² The accent of Kant's theoretical philosophy does not fall on the new picture it paints of the role of self-consciousness in the structuring of experience. According to McCormack, the way Barth appropriates Kant shows that he is first and foremost concerned with what is "objectively real" and not with human subjectivity and its relation to revelation.²³

The importance of Kant's theoretical philosophy for Barth turns out to be its empiricism: God must become intuitable like any other object in time and space in order to be known. As the human subject encounters the object (Jesus), God imparts the knowledge that this object is God through the Holy Spirit.²⁴ This is important if we hope to understand why

²¹ It is hard to locate a comprehensive presentation or summary of how McCormack views Barth's use of Kant's philosophical framework in *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*. There one has to assemble a picture from various comments and premises spread over a broader account of Barth's intellectual development. Fortunately, McCormack has given a more succinct presentation of the issue in the paper "Revelation and History in Transfoundationalist Perspective: Karl Barth's Theological Epistemology in Conversation with a Schleiermacherian Tradition." See *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids, : Baker Academic, 2008). I read the more fragmented account of the relationship in *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology* in light of the general presentation of the issue in this essay, which was published three years after the intellectual biography.

²² However critical McCormack's Barth is on other issues, he appears uncritical in his acceptance of the Kantian philosophical framework (as McCormack understands it). "He [Barth] took for granted the validity of Kant's epistemology as set forth in the First Critique, as well as the success of his attack on metaphysics." McCormack, *Karl Barth's Dialectical Theology*, 245.

²³ *Ibid.*, 135.

²⁴ McCormack writes: "Light is cast on this event, a power is exercised, so that without setting aside or altering the human cognitive apparatus as described by Kant, the limitations inherent to that apparatus are transcended. The unintuitable God is revealed to faith through the medium of an intuitable event. Revelation reaches its goal in the human recipient, and

McCormack thinks that a book such as the *Fides Quaerens Intellectum* cannot provide us with significant insight into Barth's theological method. Because the knowledge of God's revelation is imparted by God directly in the human subject, a rationally mediated (and strictly conceptual) account of the necessity of affirming the existence of God is not necessary. The *Prosligion* does not include an account of directly encountering an intuitible object. Therefore its rational proof of the existence of God seems superfluous, since the conviction that God is revealed in the object, Jesus, happens immediately (in the human subject) from one moment to the next.²⁵

A consequence of accepting this account of Barth's theology has been to replace Barth's own interpretation of his thinking with someone else's account of his thinking. This prioritizes a secondary reading of Barth over Barth's own texts. With this development it becomes increasingly complicated to find a determinate criterion for the correctness of the various possible secondary readings: rather than Barth's own text, the criterion becomes a notion of what Barth ought to have written—a construct that can stand in opposition to the concrete textual basis.

knowledge of God is realized." McCormack, "Revelation and History," 30. What does "knowing" (*Erkenntnis*) mean here? The only answer that the subject can give to the question of why the subject has this particular belief is the claim that God has made it so (by means of his "power")—full stop. This appears arbitrary: the subject's claim to knowledge hinges completely on God's immediate impartation of a particular conviction directly in the subject independent of any actual relation to the object or event involved. (The answer to the question why one knows it to be true is the claim that God's power made it so. End of explanation.) Thus the "epistemological framework" that McCormack invokes boils down to the human subject encountering an object or event and God imparting the subjective conviction that this object or event reveals God's being. The reason for holding the belief is strictly subjective, since the subject cannot give any objective reasons or invoke features of the object (its mode of givenness) as justification for holding the belief. The way the object or event is given to the subject does not contribute anything to the subject's knowledge.

²⁵This is one aspect of Barth's "actualism," which along with "*Realdialektik*" is one of McCormack's central explanatory terms. According to McCormack, Barth's "actualistic" concept of God's being is derived from Hermann Cohen's philosophical anthropology: "For Hermann Cohen, the founder of Marburg neo-Kantianism, the human simply *is* the sum total of his or her lifetime of knowing activities. Expressed more expansively: the human is what he or she does. It was but a short step from here to reflection upon the divine nature as actualistic—a point which Barth would begin to ground christologically just two and a half years after publishing his second *Romans*." McCormack, "Introduction," in *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 12. In other words, Barth bases his concept of God on a neo-Kantian anthropology and then, subsequently, justifies this move christologically.

In later work, McCormack has continued to invoke a “correct” Barthian view in order to distance himself from formulations given in Barth’s own text. An example is the influential paper in the *Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, “Grace and Being.”²⁶ With this development, there is a risk that Barth’s own wording and text becomes of secondary importance to understanding the “Barthian” approach to theology.

McCormack’s account of Barth’s work and its development has proved to be very influential. As a result, relatively little work has been done on Barth’s use of Anselm’s *Proslogion* since the publication of *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*. Most readers of Barth pass over the *Fides Quaerens Intellectum* with a reference to McCormack’s criticism. For example, in *Karl Barth on Theology and Philosophy*, Kenneth Oakes only briefly discusses the influence of *Fides Quaerens Intellectum* on Barth’s theology.²⁷ Relying on McCormack’s seven-page account of the book, he concludes: “It now seems, however, that the Anselm book does not represent a great conceptual or theological advance beyond the *Göttingen Dogmatics* and the *Christliche Dogmatik*.”²⁸ In other words, if we want to understand Barth’s theological theory and praxis there are other and better places to look than the *Fides Quaerens Intellectum*. This seems to be a more or less uncritical acceptance of McCormack’s account of Barth’s theology.²⁹ In Keith L. Johnson’s *Karl Barth and the Analogia Entis* from 2010, the discussion of Barth’s use of Anselm’s so-called ontological proof is relegated to a footnote, where the entire issue is dismissed in two brief paragraphs with a reference to McCormack’s seven-page chapter on the *Fides Quaerens Intellectum*.³⁰ These examples indicate that McCormack’s seven-page reading of the *Fides Quaerens Intellectum* has assumed the status of a dogma and has ceased to be the subject of critical inquiry. I sug-

²⁶ Bruce McCormack, “Grace and Being: The Role of God’s Gracious Election in Karl Barth’s Theological Ontology,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John Webster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 92–110.

²⁷ Oakes’s account of the *Fides Quaerens Intellectum* itself appears dismissive. He describes it as “basically an introduction to Anselm’s theology” with an “idiosyncratic reading of *Proslogion* 2–4” attached. Kenneth Oakes, *Karl Barth on Theology and Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 173.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 174.

²⁹ Later in his book, Oakes explicitly writes in a different context: “One should usually be hesitant in the face of Barth’s autobiographical reflections, and this one is no exception.” This dismissive attitude is a direct result of the influence of McCormack’s intellectual biography from 1995. *Ibid.*, 193.

³⁰ Keith L. Johnson, *Karl Barth and the Analogia Entis* (London: T & T Clark, 2010).

gest it is time to reexamine whether the picture of Barth that gives rise to the dismissal is accurate.

In short, McCormack's seven-page account of *Fides Quaerens Intellectum* needs revision. This includes reexamining Barth's theological development from 1922 up to 1931. The *Fides Quaerens Intellectum* plays an important role in my account of the speculative aspect of Karl Barth's theology, and I will give a detailed presentation of its scope and aim later. For now, it is enough to open up the possibility that the work might indeed be as important for understanding the development of Barth's theology as he himself thinks it is.

D. I want to dwell for a moment on an implicit motivation behind the "realistic" account of Barth's theology, because it leads to an important question concerning Barth's "speculative theology" that I have left unaddressed thus far.

Significantly, McCormack's work attempts to ground Barth's theology in something that cannot be reduced to "anthropological presuppositions," to give it a foundation beyond what happens to make sense to particular thinkers in a given epoch. In McCormack's view, if it is not grounded in that way, it would appear as historically contingent and would be vulnerable to skepticism. Behind this yearning for a reality beyond historically shaped dispute, discourse, and argumentation is a deep suspicion and critique of non-foundational approaches to theology (and to knowledge as such).³¹ This springs in part from a modern anxiety concerning the relationship between thought and reality. For McCormack, if theology (in particular, but the structure of the argument extends to all forms of knowledge) is not anchored in a reality that involves more than the inter-subjective conceptual mediation of human knowers, it appears as a "frictionless spinning in the void," to borrow a phrase from the philosopher John McDowell. Barth's "Realism" is supposed to block this development. Throughout his work, McCormack describes the relationship between knowledge and reality from a "sideways-on" point of view, where a limited realm of conceptual mediation is placed on one side of a divide and the "real Reality" (of God) is placed on the other.³² I do not think that this approach works.

³¹ See Bruce McCormack, "Beyond Nonfoundational and Postmodern Readings of Barth: Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology," in *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 109–65.

³² For a critical account of such a "sideways-on" picture of knowledge, see John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 34–6.

In fact, I think it produces the opposite effect from what McCormack wants.³³

Still, seen from this angle, McCormack's work raises an important question, which bears directly on the idea of a "speculative theology": namely, what is the basis or ground for Barth's theoretical or doctrinal claims? If it is not the invocation of a "really, real Reality" beyond the scope of our (supposedly) limited conceptual mediation and intersubjective pursuit of justified belief, what can it be? Speculation entails mirroring, and a second-order reflection on a particular material, making its immanent structure or "rationality" explicit. In McCormack's view the foundation, the object, is God's being construed as "Real" from the sideways-on view or perspective that encompasses both a limited conceptual sphere and the brute object that I described a moment ago. If I want to deny that this is a useful picture of theological knowledge, I need to indicate the ground of Barth's theological reflections; what is its subject matter, its "*Sache*"?

Earlier I quoted Barth on the relationship between theory and praxis from the second Romans-commentary. I want to insist that in a way the basis or ground of Barth's theology is a particular praxis. Barth is *working on* something and this work *is* the foundation. Nonetheless, this still leaves the question of what the "raw material" of this work is. Barth himself asks this question in a much-quoted passage from the preface to the second edition of *Romans*: "So what do I mean, when I call the *inner dialectic of the matter* and its recognition in the wording of the text the distinguishing factor for understanding and presentation?"³⁴

Most readers of Barth take it that the question invokes two distinguishable things that can and should be kept apart: the inner dialectic of the matter *and* its textual expression.³⁵ This distinction roughly fits with the distinction between a limited conceptual sphere and the real reality beyond. Thus the picture we are most often given of what Barth is after is

³³ As A. C. Grayling points out, "Realism" as an epistemological thesis is essentially congenial to relativism and skepticism. See *An Introduction to Philosophical Logic* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1997), 320. In my view, Grayling's philosophical critique also applies to McCormack's theological "Realism."

³⁴ Barth, *Römerbrief*, xx.

³⁵ McCormack traces this development back to Eberhard Jüngel's influential essay "Von der Dialektik zur Analogie: Die Schule Kierkegaards und der Einspruch Petersons," from *Barth-Studien* (Zürich and Cologne: Benziger Verlag, and Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1982), 127–79.

something along these lines: on the one hand there is an object that has an inner dialectic, and on the other hand there is a text that provides a more or less distorted representation of that object. What we should “really” be after is the object behind the text. This object standing behind the text (and, implicitly, outside our conceptual reach) is inherently dialectical. And here McCormack and Michael Beintker insert the term “*Realdialektik*.”³⁶

I do not think that this is the right picture of Barth’s approach. A careful reading of the question, and its context and answer in the preface, suggests a different way of viewing the relationship between the matter and the text. I go into greater detail in my reading of *Romans II* in Chap. 5, but a short version of the argument runs like this:

First, it cannot be sufficiently stressed that Barth’s commentary on Paul’s *Romans* is exactly that: an exegetical commentary on a Pauline text. Its form is biblical commentary; its matter is a biblical text; its aim is biblical exegesis.³⁷ It is clear from the preface to *Romans II* that what matters to Barth is getting Paul right. His argument in the preface is with those who claim that he has failed to do so. He is not making a doctrinal argument, claiming that his interlocutors have misunderstood his dogmatic innovations. Instead he accuses them of harboring a series of (philosophical, theological, psychological, political, etc.) presuppositions that prevent them from clearly seeing what Paul is, in fact, writing: “To me the historically-critical [exegetes] need to be [even] more critical! If, then, ‘what [the text] says’ is to be understood, it is not by being occasionally interrupted at some random points by the exegetes’ particular ascription of value to the text’s words and word-groups, but only through an openness and willingness to assume as far as possible the inner tension of the text with more or less clearly given concepts. To me, when facing a historical document, *Krinein* means measuring all the words and word-groups

³⁶ McCormack refers to the above quote from the preface to *Romans II* as the *locus classicus* for any account of Barth’s “*Realdialektik*.” According to McCormack, it is this passage, which demonstrates that Barth explicitly distinguishes between the limited conceptual sphere and the dialectics of the real reality behind the biblical texts and prioritizes the latter over the former. McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Dialectical Theology*, 11.

³⁷ I think that this important point goes missing in McCormack’s work, where the search for a real reality behind appearances takes center stage. The assertion that Barth is writing “a new theology in the form of a biblical commentary” misses the fact that Barth’s book *is* a biblical commentary, and that this is not merely a convenient form for presenting new doctrinal reflections. McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Dialectical Theology*, 138. Of course, the form of *Romans I* and *II* is that of biblical commentary, but it is of utmost importance to recognize that *their matter is the actual argument made in Paul’s text*.

contained therein by the matter about which it apparently speaks—lest it all be nonsense.”³⁸

When Barth invokes the “inner dialectic of the matter and its recognition in the wording of the text” about a page later, it refers back to the openness and willingness to assume the inner tension of the text, presented in more or less clear concepts, mentioned in the quote above. Barth’s avowed aim in his commentary is not to uncover some hidden reality beneath, beyond, or above Paul’s text, but as clearly as possible to formulate the questions the text asks in light of the answers that the text gives, and vice versa.³⁹ It is in this context that Barth makes the radical programmatic statement that he wants to be so close to the text that he can almost forget that he is not its author—knowing full well that this statement is bound to be misunderstood.⁴⁰ He is accused of “Biblicism” because he is deemed to be too close to the text, too comfortable with its concepts and arguments, and not because he is operating at a distance from the text and using it as an excuse to develop a new line of doctrine.

In essence, Paul’s text is “about” something in the same way that Plato’s *Theaetetus*, or Dostoyevsky’s *Demons*, is “about” something. But if the “about” here is construed “realistically” in McCormack’s sense as engaging with a realm that lies behind or beyond the text, it runs the risk of obscuring the forest amidst the trees.⁴¹ The *Theaetetus* is first and foremost about the question “what is true knowledge and how can it be recognized?” *Demons* is about the violent nihilism that underlies a particular form of secular, millenarian resentment. And, according to Barth, Paul’s *Romans* is about the human subject’s recognition of an unsublatable negativity (an “*undendlichen qualitativen Unterschied*”). As a philosophical problem, the matter of *Romans* can be formulated as the crisis of the human recognition of the *Ursprung*—a technical term that in its mathematical use denotes the point in a coordinate system where the vertical and horizontal axes meet, i.e., the point from which the entire field of possible coordinates is constituted. This problem has a particular name in the

³⁸ Barth, *Römerbrief*, xviii ff.

³⁹ Barth, *Der Römerbrief*, xix.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, xix.

⁴¹ Perhaps we could draw an analogy to the entrepreneur and amateur archaeologist, Heinrich Schliemann, who was convinced that the *Iliad* was “really about” a place, Troy, and managed to destroy much of the archaeological treasure that he discovered by digging past the layers that might actually bear some historical relation to Homer’s Ilion.

biblical scriptures: “At this crossroads the Bible sees Jesus Christ.”⁴² The text tells us who and what the name “Jesus Christ” designates, and we must read it to find out.

Now I think that McCormack’s reading of Barth’s theological epistemology became so widely accepted in part because it offered an account of the radical aseity of God by means of a recognizably Kantian terminology. “Realism” served to underscore the criticism of anthropological presuppositions that is omnipresent in Barth’s early theology: God’s being is real no matter what we happen to think about it. The problem is that this claim does not help us distinguish Barth’s thinking from any other given monotheistic, religious ideology. If it is possible for a Calvinist or a Muslim fundamentalist to make exactly the same claim about the transcendent reality of God as God figures in his or her ideology, then the claim begins to appear vacuous. What makes Barth’s theology different is not that it makes a commitment to the radical aseity of God in place as a presupposition before the theological work gets going: all are free to help themselves to that particular proposition. Instead what Barth argues is that the above-mentioned radical negativity appears as an acknowledgment generated from within the praxis of reading *Romans* as one struggles to grasp the actual argument that Paul’s text is making.

This is what Paul’s text is essentially about: a particular conceptual problem concerning the practical acknowledgment of an unsublatable negation, which is expressed in the name, Jesus Christ. And, according to Barth’s reading, when Paul assembles his concepts throughout the text, it is this practical and theoretical problem that he has before him. What it means in detail, how it is to be understood concretely, and what its practical and theoretical consequences are, is worked out in the Pauline epistle itself.

Of course, making a distinction between the errand of a given textual reflection and its historical basis does not entail disputing, for example, that there once was a brilliant young Athenian named Theaetetus, that Dostoyevsky’s novel touches on the (real) Russian revolutionary, Sergey Nechayev, or that there was a crucified son of a Palestinian carpenter named Yeshua ben Yosef. My argument is just that we have not managed to understand the *Theaetetus*, *Demons*, or Paul’s *Romans* when we point out that they are “really about” some historical event or some other “reality” beyond the actual wording and structure of the text itself.

⁴² Barth, *Der Römerbrief*, xx.

To return to the question I asked earlier in this section concerning the ground of Barth's theology: what, then, is Barth's (later) speculative theology a reflection on? The short answer is that it is a reflection on the biblical scriptures, a reflection that takes place within the conceptual horizon to which these texts themselves give expression. Barth's speculative theology in the *Kirchliche Dogmatik* is his theoretical accompaniment to the Protestant praxis of reading scripture for the sake of proclaiming the questions that the Bible poses to its readers as well as the answers that it gives to those same questions. By reflecting on the biblical scriptures and drawing inferences that exceed the textual basis in light of the immanent rationality structuring that same text's arguments and concepts, Barth becomes a speculative theologian. He differs from his nineteenth-century predecessor by insisting that the reading praxis itself always potentially deconstructs and destabilizes his hard-won doctrinal constructs. In this way he harkened back to the great Protestant reformers and circumvented many of the modern philosophical pitfalls concerning ontology, semantics, and so on.

An indication that Barth has circumvented at least one of these pitfalls is that, on the reading presented above, the supposed problem of how thought and reality match up ceases to be important. It is not a pressing concern for Barth how things stand with semantics in general. His concern is with concept-laden texts, with uncovering their immanent rationality or structure. This means that "Realism" as a general semantic thesis becomes a marginal issue. It is replaced with the question of the extent to which one can legitimately draw inferences that run beyond the immediate wording of the texts themselves, i.e., with what our understanding the text allows us to assert, affirm, and proclaim. This potentially takes us beyond the explicit formulations of the biblical scriptures, but it does not entail that we are concerned with anything beyond the scope of conceptual mediation and inter-subjective justification of our beliefs. It is, of course, possible that when it came to epistemic and semantic issues beyond the praxis of theology, Barth was a staunch realist. I don't think that was the case, but even if it were it would have very little bearing on the structure of his theological thinking.

Barth's theological method is essentially *speculative reading*. Barth usually calls it *Nachdenken*, but it amounts to the same thing. And, again, one of my key reasons for explicitly invoking the speculative aspect is that it opens up space for new conversations with the tradition of German Idealism.

E. But why not simply call it *Nachdenken* and be done? Is it so important to use the term "speculative"? Granted, it invokes a certain relationship

with the Idealists, but is it not more trouble than it is worth to insist that Barth's theology is "speculative", when there are places where he himself critiques theological "speculation"?

This brings us back to the issue of how much weight one can reasonably place on Barth's affirmation of the inescapability of speculative theology from the *Fides Quaerens Intellectum*. As mentioned earlier, I think there is some room for skepticism concerning the current consensus on the book's place in Barth's development. And it does not seem to me that the current readings have done the work justice.⁴³ Assuming that there remains room for accepting Barth's own account of his work, the programmatic affirmation of speculative theology can be taken to appear in one of *the* key texts for understanding Barth's theological approach. Even if such affirmations are rare that only makes it so much more remarkable to find such an unequivocal endorsement of speculative theology in a work to which Barth allotted a privileged status in relation to the rest of his oeuvre.

And it is not the only such endorsement. In his late lectures, *Evangelical Theology*, from 1963, published a good thirty-two years later, Barth writes: "Theology's whole illumination can be only its human reflection, or mirroring (in the precise sense of 'speculation!'); and its whole production can be only a human reproduction."⁴⁴ Again this is a programmatic claim, which puts forward a general definition of theology. Again, it suggests that theology as such is "speculative," including Barth's own contribution to the field. But, as mentioned, there are a series of places where Barth rejects "speculation," so how are we to understand his use of the term in light of both his affirmation and his criticism? It appears that there are two forms of "speculation" between which we have to distinguish. How do we separate the good form of speculation from the bad form of speculation? This is one of the central questions that I will answer. In lieu of what I have already written above, I hope it is clear that much (if not everything) hinges on an understanding of how Barth defines the actual praxis of

⁴³A notable exception is Bent Flemming Nielsen's brilliant book *Die Rationalität der Offenbarungstheologie—die Struktur des Theologieverständnisses von Karl Barth* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1988). My own work is an attempt to draw out some of Nielsen's implicit suggestions concerning Barth's theology and the relationship between theory and praxis, subjectivity, German Idealism, and speculation. In short, without whom not.

⁴⁴Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979), 17.

theology. It concerns primarily what the theologian does more than what the theologian says.

Now it is important for me to stress that this issue is immanent to Barth's own texts. It is an apparent contradiction in Barth's actual work, where the same concept is both affirmed and criticized. In my view, this sharply distinguishes the issue from the controversy surrounding the status of the *Fides Quaerens Intellectum*, where the contradiction is between what readers think Barth ought to have said and what he actually says.⁴⁵ As a work of conceptual clarification, my approach is warranted without the need to invoke the notion of an underlying structure of Barth's theology that appears as distorted in his actual texts. If the claim that Barth's theology can be accurately described as "speculative" is counterintuitive, it is because this is an interpretation of his work that has been overlooked or even dismissed by his later readers—it is not because it lacks textual warrant.

Of course, it is always possible to over-interpret and over-determine particular passages and claims when one seeks to shed light on the driving ideas of any literary career that has developed for over fifty years. As is well known, the *Kirchliche Dogmatik* alone occupies over nine thousand pages and is filled with programmatic assertions, premises, and inferences. When I single out the affirmation of "speculative theology," it is because I think they shed light on an under-investigated aspect of Barth's thinking—an issue that calls for conceptual clarification—but there is more to it than that. I think the greater context, the status of his book on *Prologion 2–4*, is important as well. I think that it tells us exactly how Barth conceives the praxis of doing theology. In my view, Barth's theological praxis develops in a decidedly speculative direction and that the *Fides Quaerens Intellectum* marks the first unequivocal affirmation of that development. In short, if we follow the path of Barth's theological development with these affirmations of "speculative theology" in mind, we will find that they are the tips of a much larger conceptual iceberg, and that this tip becomes a prism through which we can shine a light into otherwise dark corners of his work. Still, the proof of all this is in the pudding.

F. Having explained *what* I would like to do in this essay, it is time to outline *how* I intend to do it. The book has two distinct parts. The first is a study of the various issues, innovations, and, ultimately, problems that emerged with the philosophical revolution of German Idealism and its

⁴⁵ By contrast, in *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, McCormack does not cite the single passage in Barth's texts in which "*Realdialektik*" occurs.

artistic accompaniment, Romanticism. The second part addresses the “theory of praxis” that Barth develops in *Römerbrief II* and which continues to undergird his theological reflections throughout his authorship, culminating in the *magnum opus*, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik*. I begin explicitly to address the speculative aspect of Barth’s theory and praxis, and Barth’s 1931 book on Anselm of Canterbury’s *Proslogion* plays an important part. Then I take up the three early volumes of his *magnum opus*, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik* I,1 and II,1–2 and narrow in on the issues of divine freedom. I end with a (personal) reflection on aesthetics.

Concretely, in Chap. 3, I begin by providing a rough outline of some of the seminal aspects of German Idealism, focusing especially on the issue of self-consciousness and freedom. It is essentially a chapter on Kant. Then, in my fourth chapter, I turn to Hegel as the figure who exemplifies the high point of German Idealism and the theoretical conclusion of its development from Kant onwards. In preparation for some later discussion when I turn to Barth, I will focus especially on Hegel’s *Science of Logic* and his fascinating discussion of the so-called ontological proof of the existence of God in the section on the *Syllogism* in particular.

The fifth chapter examines the early work of Karl Barth and Eduard Thurneysen. Here the primary texts are Barth’s *Römerbrief II* and Thurneysen’s *Dostoyevsky* as well as letters and public lectures from the period. I will also very briefly discuss how this theological work fits into the broader intellectual context of the period.

In Chap. 6 I turn to Barth’s reflections on the relationship between subjectivity, freedom, and rationality as they are expressed in his work from 1931 onwards. This also entails examining the relationship between Barth’s speculative theology and the logical theology of Anselm of Canterbury. The primary text is Barth’s *Fides Quaerens Intellectum*.

In Chap. 7 I pursue this line of reflection through the initial volumes of the *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, narrowing in on freedom as a divine attribute. In part, I take my cues from Barth’s reflections on the affirmative aspect of the theological use of reason in relation to the freedom of God and the brief (and quite puzzling) account of the beauty of God, also found in the account of the attributes of divine freedom in *Kirchliche Dogmatik* II, 1. I also draw on the work of the Harvard art historian, Joseph Leo Koerner.

G. Finally, before diving into the substance of my argument in the book, I want to comment on the question of translation. The current English translation of Barth’s work leaves something to be desired. The translation of Barth’s *Römerbrief II* is particularly problematic. Unless I indicate

otherwise, then, all quotes from *Römerbrief II* are my own translations. The English translation of *Fides Quaerens Intellectum* fares better, although there are one or two issues that need to be addressed. The main issue is with the translation of *Bezeichnung*, which in English is rendered as “description.” I suspect that semantic, philosophical issues concerning the Russellian notion of “definite descriptions” played a part in deciding on this specific translation. I stick relatively close to the current translation, but have found it more fruitful to use “designation” instead of “description.” There are many good new translations of the main work of the German Idealists available due to the renaissance of that philosophical movement in light of recent developments in the field of Anglo-American pragmatic philosophy. Here I have found little reason not to rely primarily on what are solid translations. Nonetheless, when it comes to Hegel’s *Wissenschaft der Logik I* I have found the older Routledge edition to be more useful than the new Cambridge University Press edition. Perhaps it is wrong to rely on aesthetics in making such decisions, but I think the “flow” of the old translation is better—and when it comes to Hegel, such things matter.

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PART I

German Idealism

Kant's Critical Philosophy

The I has a hieroglyphic power.
Novalis, Fichte Studies

A person schooled in the liberal theology of the *fin de siècle* would have had a disorienting experience when initially reading either the 1919 or the 1922 edition of Barth's Romans commentary. First, he would have become immediately aware of the radical change in nomenclature that Wittgenstein addressed in the aphorism from *Culture and Value* with which I opened this book. Barth placed topics, phrases, and terms that were considered irrelevant and problematic by most of his theological colleagues at the center of his biblical commentary. This was immediately noted by the Swiss exegete Paul Wernle. To him it was deeply problematic that Barth seriously engaged with several Pauline topics (Christ as the son of God, reconciliation through the blood of Christ, the double-predestination), which he considered to be "... Anstösse des modernen Bewusstseins [... Repulsive to modern consciousness]."¹ There was a modern consciousness, a self-consciousness, that appeared to be at odds with what Barth was doing.

The theologically informed contemporary reader of *Der Römerbrief* would have been shaped by a particular set of philosophical and cultural values and presuppositions. He would have a particular understanding of

¹Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 2011), xxii.

the human subject's essential involvement in grasping and shaping the world. This is significant, because several of the initial, influential reviews of Barth's text invoked the particular form of self-consciousness that they thought the author of *Der Römerbrief* exhibited. The implicit self-consciousness of the writer, they suggested, was the key to understanding Barth's text. And, remarkably, this was the case for both friend and foe.

In his critical review of the first edition of *Der Römerbrief*, Adolf Jülicher characterized the point of view of the writer as "heilige[n] Egoismus [holy egoism]." ² And, in his response to Jülicher, Friedrich Gogarten closed his spirited defense of Barth's text by invoking an "intensiven 'Subjektivismus' [intense subjectivism]" as the standpoint from which the commentary is supposed to be understood. ³ For Jülicher the reference to Barth's self-understanding sealed his critical rejection of the commentary. For Gogarten it was—when properly understood—a condition of possibility.

This focus on self-consciousness is, perhaps, most clearly brought out in Rudolf Bultmann's influential review of the second edition of the Romans commentary. There the reader is told that in order to understand what Barth is after ("*die Sache zu begreifen*"), he must first recognize that there is a particular form of self-consciousness at work in the text: "... es sich bei ihm im Grunde nicht um eine Moderne Modeströmung, eine Reaktionserscheinung, eine bloße Negation handelt, sondern hier das Selbstbewusstsein spricht, das lebendigem Glauben stets eigen war. Keiner hat in unser Zeit klarer als diesem Selbstbewusstsein heraus die Eigenheit und Absolutheit der 'Religion' (des Glaubens!) verkündet als Wilhelm Herrmann, mit dem Barth hier ganz einig ist [... for him it does not essentially concern a modern countercurrent, an apparent reaction, a bald negation. Rather here the self-consciousness, which was always the living faith's own, speaks. In our time, no one has proclaimed the singularity and absoluteness of 'religion' (of faith!) from out of this self-consciousness clearer than Wilhelm Herrmann, with whom Barth is here in complete agreement]." ⁴

² Adolf Jülicher, "Ein Moderner Paulus-Ausleger", in *Anfänge der dialektischen Theologie*, ed. Jürgen Moltmann (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1977), 98.

³ Friedrich Gogarten, "Vom Heiligen Egoismus des Christen", in *Anfänge der dialektischen Theologie*, ed. Jürgen Moltmann (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1977), 104.

⁴ Rudolf Bultmann, "Karl Barths 'Römerbrief' in zweiter Auflage", in *Anfänge der dialektischen Theologie*, ed. Jürgen Moltmann (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1977), 121.

The consciousness of modern man, the ego, subjectivity (more or less “intense”), and self-consciousness: whether or not Barth’s text makes sense depends on our understanding of these closely related concepts—and on their relation to theological reflection. This is the one thing on which a number of the early, influential reviewers of Barth’s text agreed.⁵ Addressing the issue of self-consciousness seemed to enable them to grasp Barth’s biblical commentary; positing it allowed them to orient themselves in the text. Whether or not we agree with their readings of Barth, the authors draw our attention to an essential aspect of the intellectual context of Barth’s early theology: the central and determining place accorded to the thinking subject. Giving an account of how and why the self-conscious subject came to occupy this paramount position in the intellectual landscape will help us to understand what was at stake for Barth, when first he turned to Paul’s Romans.

To bring this out we need to tell the story about the advent and influence of German Idealism and about the consequences of the revolution in thinking that this philosophical movement brought about in epistemology, in ethics, in culture. This entails examining its roots in Immanuel Kant’s three-part critical philosophy (in the three *Critiques* written between 1781 and 1790), its shoots in J. G. Fichte’s thoughts on self-consciousness and imagination (in his *Wissenschaftslehre* from 1794), its various artistic branches in such Romantic artists as Caspar David Friedrich and Novalis, and, finally, what is, arguably, its crowning achievement—G. W. F. Hegel’s speculative philosophy (from *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, written in 1807, onwards). All in all, we are looking at about fifty to sixty years of intellectual developments and revolutions.

A good place to begin the long and intricate story of the rise of German Idealism is with Immanuel Kant’s critical appropriation of René Descartes’s understanding of the role of the thinking subject in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. From this starting point the direction and categories of Kant’s philosophy fall into place on their own. I will therefore begin by simply following the development of Kant’s account of the relationship between self-consciousness, freedom, and rationality over the course of the three *Critiques*.

⁵ Adolf Schlatter’s review is the notable exception. In some ways, it is the most interesting review of Barth’s *Römerbrief* II and I will return to it in my discussion of the early dialectical theology below.

KANT

A. Certainly, the recognition of the importance of the self-conscious thinker in philosophical and theological reflection did not begin with Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy*. For example, Augustine had already explicitly addressed the manner in which the mind knows itself to be thinking in *De Trinitate* and had also pointed to the importance of addressing the role of the self in philosophical orientation and formation in his *Confessiones*.⁶ Nonetheless, with René Descartes what we now know as modern philosophy was born and with it came a sense that both the major philosophical problems and their possible solutions depended to a large extent on how one understood the relation, or even contribution, of the self-conscious subject to our grasp of the world.

For Descartes it was not a question of any given notion of the self. First, it was not the material, bodily self that was at stake. It was the “I” of the “I think.” Faced with the revolution of the new sciences that deeply challenged the scholastic understanding of how the world was structured, Descartes thought that knowledge needed to rest on clear and distinct ideas that could be deduced by reason alone. His implicit model for this clear and distinct form of knowledge was formal, mathematical. Anything that did not fit these requirements could not properly count as knowledge—at least until it could somehow be shown to derive from already established clear and distinct ideas. Anything that could remotely appear to be an illusion needed to be critically negated. Therefore, at the beginning of *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes proceeded to call all that he appeared to know into question through a method of systematic doubt, and this also included doubting his bodily identity.⁷ At the end the only certainty left was the immediate awareness of his own thinking *as thinking*. And as he is thinking he is immediately certain of his own existence. This is what is expressed in the famous dictum *cogito ergo sum*.⁸

⁶ See in particular Book X, Chapter 2 of *De Trinitate*: Augustine, *The Trinity* (Hyde Park, New York: New City Press, 1991), 290–9.

⁷ René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996). It is not clear that we can immediately identify the “I” that thinks in the *Meditations* with the person Descartes, since the set of characteristics by which we could make such identification between the “I” and Descartes are negated through the systematic doubt.

⁸ This particular formulation does not actually appear in the *Meditations*. It is found in the version of the argument presented in the *Discourse on Method*.

As Beatrice Longuenesse points out, Descartes's certitude bears on "... the peculiar relation that obtains between the *content* of the proposition ["I think"] and the *thinking* of the proposition."⁹ Simply put, to think it makes it true (thinking it fulfills its truth-condition that there *be* thinking). Longuenesse writes: "Descartes' Archimedean point, lifting him out of radical doubt, thus rests on two pillars: that 'I exist' is a necessary condition of 'I think'; and that 'I think' is both *true* and *known to be true* just by virtue of being thought."¹⁰ From this Archimedean point, Descartes began to reassemble the world that he had called into question through his method of doubt. This line of thought is—for better or worse—the beginning of modern philosophy.

B. It is this nexus of first-person thought and being that Kant appropriates in his critical philosophy—but only after putting his own characteristic spin on it. It is to a large extent Kant's particular twist on Descartes's use of the "I think" that inaugurates the movement of German Idealism and its cultural manifestation, Romanticism. After Kant the subject is no longer simply a condition of possibility for clear and distinct thought—it actively shapes the world as the quintessential locus of freedom, responsibility, and reason. As such, Kant's work signals both the end of an epoch and the beginning of another.

The issue of first-person thought was of paramount importance for Kant. He opens the famous paragraph 16 of the Transcendental Deduction of the Categories with the following programmatic statement: "The **I think** must be **able** to accompany all my representations: for otherwise something would be represented in me that could not be thought at all, which is as much as to say that the representation would either be impossible or else at least would be nothing to me."¹¹ While Descartes is not explicitly mentioned, it is hard not to see the connection between this passage and the *Meditations*. In fact, taken on its own the passage could even appear as an endorsement of the Cartesian analysis.

Nevertheless, the passage should be read in the context of Kant's further critique of the idea of the mind as a thinking substance apart from the body, and his rejection of what he calls Descartes's "problematic idealism,"

⁹ Beatrice Longuenesse, "Kant's 'I Think' versus Descartes' 'I Am a Thing That Thinks,'" in *Kant and the Early Moderns*, ed. Beatrice Longuenesse and Daniel Garber, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 13.

¹⁰ Longuenesse, "Kant's 'I Think,'" 14.

¹¹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), B132 (246).

positing that the mind is more immediately known to a person than is her physical body (clearer and more distinct). Our task now is to understand how Kant can write what he writes about the “I think” in the Transcendental Deduction and still critique definitive parts of Descartes’s analysis in *Meditations*.

First, it is important to point out that Kant’s *use* of the “I think” differs significantly from Descartes’s. Kant was not concerned with quieting the version of skepticism that is expressed in the systematic doubt of the *Meditations*. Therefore his account does not turn directly on the status of the existence of the given objects of experience. Rather, Kant wanted to defend the findings of the new sciences and especially Newton’s natural philosophy from the epistemic skepticism of David Hume, who had argued that fundamental metaphysical ideas—first and foremost causality—did not have objective validity. Rather, Hume argued, cause and effect were the expression of a purely subjective imposition of order on thoughts or ideas derived from our sense impressions; a subjective way of combining the mind’s various ideas, operating at a distance from the given objects of our perception. Hume’s argument was that if we were able to conceive of particular things or phenomena as being distinct then we ought not posit that there is an objective, necessary connection between them. If fire and smoke can be conceived separately and as distinct entities, then the connection between them is not necessary.¹² Thus if the notion of causality does not appear to have objective validity, it has to be a subjective principle governing the association of ideas. It is this line of skepticism that is Kant’s primary target. And it allows us to appreciate how his particular use of the “I think” changes accordingly.

A first step in giving an account of Kant’s critique of Hume is to point out that it is an essential feature of the unity of self-consciousness that it imposes a certain logical form on the thoughts we can have. If I think “the leaf is (entirely) green” and I also think “the leaf is (entirely) brown” I will either be thinking about two leaves (distinctly positioned in space) or, if I am thinking about the same leaf, there will have been a temporal interval between the two thoughts. If not, I am contradicting myself. As Beatrice Longuenesse writes: “The role of the ‘I’ here is to express the fact that one and the same thinker, from one and the same standpoint, thinks the thoughts by which sense is made of a complex array of perceptual

¹²Daniel E. Flage, *David Hume’s Theory of Mind* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 89.

experiences.”¹³ The “I think” signals a particular standpoint, placing the thinker in a particular position, which includes a certain time and space.

This insight is important. It allows Kant to explicitly address a crucial element of Hume’s skepticism, since the unifying standpoint of the “I think” entails a further claim about how experience is structured by the thinking and sensing subject. To see how we need to say a bit more about how Hume thinks we acquire knowledge about the world.

Very generally, according to Hume, knowledge arises from impressions that are the products of immediate experience. On the one hand, we have perceptions of objects present to the mind arising through sensations or sentiments (desires, emotions, pleasure, and pain). On the other hand, we have recollected impressions present in the mind, which Hume calls ideas.¹⁴ These are less vivid representations of immediate sensations and sentiments that can subsequently be combined in various ways in the imagination through paths of association. Thus Hume’s skepticism is not about the extra-mental existence of distinct objects—their objective reality is immediately given through vivid impressions. The skeptical turn from objectivity to subjectivity arises when the imagination begins to make use of ideas, for example by imposing a causal order on them. At that moment a gap opens between our ideas about the world and the immediate experience of given objects as the principle of causality operates at a distance from what can legitimately be claimed about how the distinct objects of experience impress themselves on the thinker.

Now, as we saw, Kant recognizes that the “I think” also entails that the objects of my experience must be thought to belong in one space and one time. In order to close the gap between the experience of objects and the principle of causality, Kant makes the further claim that space and time are forms of our intuition.¹⁵ As such the spatial and temporal unity of

¹³ Longuenesse, “Kant’s ‘I Think,’” 16. Longuenesse continues: “If the latter were attributed to *different* thinkers, no similar demand of consistency between the perceptual thoughts could be demanded—although of course *different* standpoints can themselves be evaluated within *one* standpoint that locates them with respect to one another: again, the standpoint of the ‘I’ in ‘I think.’”

¹⁴ According to Hume, impressions are causally prior to ideas. “He [Hume] claims that experience teaches that impressions always are followed by their corresponding ideas, but ideas do not produce their corresponding impressions. Hence (simple) impressions cause (simple) ideas.” Flage, *Hume’s Theory of Mind*, 23.

¹⁵ Wilfrid Sellars gives a more “minimalist” account of Kant’s argument: “Having particular intuitions involves having the conceptual framework of space and time. Hence the possession of the latter cannot be accounted for in terms of the former. Kant infers that the ability

intuition spring from the same source as the conceptual unity of the categories of the “I think”¹⁶: both essentially belong to the same “I.”¹⁷ By arguing for the expansion of the reach of the subject to encompass the form of sensory intuitions, Kant guarantees the objectivity of the principle of causality insofar as both thoughts and intuitions can be traced back to the same order. As Wayne Waxman writes: “This means nothing less than that pure time, no less than the logical functions, categories, and categorically determinate objects of experience, is grounded on the principle of original apperception, but with one crucial difference: pure time is unity of apperception right in intuition itself, prior to discursive representation under the categories.”¹⁸ We can *in principle* envision sensations in abstraction from their conceptual mediation, but this is precisely *an abstraction*.¹⁹ If we lift the abstraction we do not find an epistemic gap between thoughts and intuitions. In a strong sense, discursive thought and sensible intuition belong together. As Kant famously put it: “Thoughts without content are

to represent items as in space and time is innate.” Wilfrid Sellars, “Some Remarks on Kant’s Theory of Experience,” in *In the Space of Reasons: Selected Essays of Wilfrid Sellars*, eds. Robert Brandom and Kevin Sharp (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 449. Giving a more comprehensive interpretation in detailed dialogue with Hume’s philosophy, Wayne Waxman has argued that Sellars is far too modest in his account of Kant’s transcendental idealism. Waxman argues that not only is the *ability* to represent items as in space and time innate—subjective succession is *essentially transcendently ideal*. Were it not, the argument against Hume’s skepticism would lose its force. See, for example, Wayne Waxman, *Kant’s Model of the Mind: A New Interpretation of Transcendental Idealism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 54.

¹⁶ “Kantian ‘categories’ are concepts of logical form, where ‘logical’ is to be taken in the broad sense, roughly equivalent to ‘epistemic.’” Sellars, “Some Remarks,” 444. Put differently, the categories function as critical classificatory rules for our classificatory engagement with things. James R. O’Shea, *Wilfrid Sellars* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 73.

¹⁷ “The categories and forms of judgment derive from this unity, not vice versa; it is therefore a unity capable of obtaining even where there are neither judgments nor concepts—in *intuition*.” Waxman, *Kant’s Model*, 89.

¹⁸ Wayne Waxman, “Kant’s Humean Solution to Hume’s Problem,” in *Kant and the Early Moderns*, ed. Beatrice Longuenesse and Daniel Garber (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 192.

¹⁹ For the purpose of developing and explicating the critical philosophy, it is important to be able to distinguish between understanding and intuition: for example, in order to stress that the pure understanding is not capable of intuiting anything without being affected by sensibility. Nonetheless: “Only from their unification can cognition arise.” Kant, *Pure Reason*, CPR A51/B76 (193). See also paragraph 20, B143 (252) and paragraph 21, B 144 and 145 (253).

empty, intuitions without concepts are blind.”²⁰ Since all our intuitions are necessarily representations of a temporally ordered world *qua* the subjective succession entailed in the “I think,” we can legitimately infer from “x is a” to “x is b” on the basis of the material content of our empirically developed concepts for states of affairs of types A and B. Thus the “meta-conceptual” principle of causality, which imposes a necessary unity on our intuitions, is *de facto* inseparable from the intuitions themselves. Hume’s epistemic gap is closed.

These considerations give us an outline of how Kant’s use of the “I think” differs from Descartes’s *cogito*. They are made to perform specific tasks in relation to two quite distinct forms of skepticism: the one form of skepticism concerns certainty in light of doubt about the existence of external objects; the other presupposes the givenness of external objects, but concerns the objective validity of the rules of their possible combination. The problem Kant addresses is how to account for the normative status of our most basic concepts, our ability to understand a manifold of sense perceptions as one unified experience. However, as different as their two projects are, they are not incompatible. The issue is rather that Kant’s critique of Hume’s skepticism allows him to distinguish, on the one hand, between the “existence” of the “I” as a representation of a logical point of view that necessarily accompanies the act of thinking, and, on the other hand, the “existence” of the actual manifold of entities within space and time—all empirical experiences of the first-person (inner sense) included.

In the *Meditations* Descartes concluded that the *cogito* entailed a thing that thinks (*res cogitans*), a thinking entity or substance. This led him to believe that proof of the existence of material objects of experience had to be developed subsequently in light of what could be said about the certainty of the existence of the *res cogitans* and its clear and distinct ideas. By invoking the concept of a thinking substance, and thus the stronger sense of existence entailed by “I think,” Descartes is, according to Kant, taking a step beyond what his (implicitly critical) insights in fact allow him to conclude. He is assimilating the notion we have of the actual existence of objects in time and space with their formal condition, the unified standpoint that we represent as the “I,” reading a strong sense of “existence” into its formal ground. In opposition to Descartes Kant points out that the thought of the apperceptive “I” is empty, void of content. All we know is that it is a pure form—and that it makes itself known as an activity, our

²⁰ Ibid., CPR A51/B76 (193).

thinking.²¹ Any actual (particular) content that we can give it is derived from our intuitions of both inner and outer states of affairs.²² These intuitions are inevitably “temporally shaped” and thus “appearances” in Kant’s specific sense, since we are precluded from obtaining a purely intellectual intuition, whereby we would directly apprehend eternal and unchangeable forms or ideas. Intuitions are always of particular entities given in a particular way. The pure form of the “I think” emerges only indirectly as a result of a critical investigation of the necessary conditions of the activity of thinking.

As Kant writes in the *Paralogisms of Pure Reason*: “We cannot even say that this is a concept, but only that it is a bare consciousness which accompanies all concepts. Through this I or he or it (the thing) which thinks, nothing further is represented than a transcendental subject of thoughts = X. It is known only through the thoughts which are its predicates, and of it, apart from them, we cannot have any concept whatsoever.”²³

This entails that the experiences of objects of outer sense and experiences of objects of inner sense both equally presuppose the “I or he or it (the thing) which thinks.”²⁴ Thus Descartes’s prioritizing of pure thought over sense experience (understanding the *sum of cogito ergo sum* as the basic sense of existence to which an extended object ought to be assimilated once they are clearly comprehended) is open to critique: we are no more immediately conscious of our inner goings on than we are of outer goings on, insofar as both take place within the temporal succession that

²¹ As Dieter Henrich points out, inspired by the thoughts of Rousseau, Kant “... adopted the conviction that all rational discourses must be analyzed as resulting from the employment of *activities*.” Dieter Henrich, *Aesthetic Judgment and the Moral Image of the World: Studies in Kant* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 18. I will return to the topic of the “I think” as an activity or process below.

²² “If the faculty for becoming conscious of oneself is to seek out (apprehend) that which lies in the mind, it must affect the latter, and it can only produce an intuition of itself in such a way, whose form, however, which antecedently grounds it in the mind in the representation of time ... there it then intuits itself not as it would immediately self-actively represent itself, but in accordance with the way it is affected from within, consequently as it appears to itself, not as it is.” Kant, *Pure Reason*, B68–69 (190).

²³ *Ibid.*, A345-6/B404 (414).

²⁴ It is important to emphasize that by “objects of outer sense” we do not mean objects conceived independently of our thoughts and intuitions. With regard to objects thus conceived it follows that we cannot say anything about how they might be *in themselves*. By objects of outer sense we mean objects in space and time, and thus objects as they appear within the scope of the subject’s forms of intuition.

derives from the unifying standpoint of the "I." Descartes's *res cogitans* is essentially empty of any actual (particular) content and cannot be said to have existence in the full sense of the term that belongs to conceptually mediated intuitions of objects located in space and time.

This is the principal difference between Kant and Descartes, which emerges only because Kant's "I think" is being put to a different use, that is, answering the Humean challenge concerning the normative status of our basic, classificatory concepts. The Kantian "I think" thus emerges as a unifying = X, a presupposition that determines the rules for rational, discursive thought. Robert Brandom sums it up nicely: "Kant makes a normative turn: a shift from the sort of ontological demarcation Descartes offers of selves as thinking beings, to a deontological demarcation of selves as loci of responsibility."²⁵ This important distinction leads us from the issue of the difference between the scope of the subject in the philosophy of Descartes and Kant directly to some of the crucial issues that structure the philosophy of the German Idealists: given this new understanding of self-consciousness, what can we say positively about it and the way it shapes our world?

C. Now we should straight away notice that with Kant's critical argument there appears to be a change of emphasis in the usage of the notions of "objective" and "subjective." At first glance it might seem counterintuitive that expanding the structuring scope of the subject to include all possible experience results in affirming the objectivity of the principle of cause and effect. Nonetheless, "objectivity" turns on the inter-subjective and discursive status of our thoughts and intuitions. An immediate "experience" (or sensation) of which we cannot give an intelligible account, discursively articulate, or provide a place for in the realm of the exchange of reasoned thought is certainly not objective in any intelligible sense of the term.

For Kant, while every individual thinker and perceiver is located at a determinate position in space and time, the universal nature of the "I think" entails that a particular, subjective position can be compared or combined with the position of any other thinker and perceiver whose thought is also potentially accompanied by the "I think." "In referring his thoughts to the 'I', the thinker (perceiver, imaginer) is doing nothing more than committing himself to the unity and consistency of his thoughts, and committing himself to obtaining a unified standpoint that could be shared by all: an objective standpoint, also called by Kant the 'objective

²⁵ Robert B. Brandom, *Tales of the Mighty Dead: Historical Essays in the Metaphysics of Intentionality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 21.

unity of apperception.”²⁶ The “I,” or the objective unity of apperception, is a point of reference that establishes a common discursive space of reasons, where various particular judgments and positions can be compared, combined, and, possibly, critiqued. It is not “objective” in the sense of being defined as some immediately given reality that exists independently of our experiences and their conceptual mediation (the point of view of naïve, commonsense realism, say). Rather, “objective” denotes communicability and exchange of first-person perceptual positions in an intersubjective and discursively mediated world of shared categories and a shared intuitive framework—a shared space and time. This is, in and of itself, an important insight, since it emphasizes the irreducible social character of objective knowledge and thought.

In other words, the “I think” has both a universal and a particular aspect: it invokes both the universal standpoint of unified thought and the particular position of a determinate thinker located in space and time. Thinking is, in a sense, the activity of mediating between these two aspects of the “I think”—the universal and the particular.

D. Thus taking their cue from Kant’s critical philosophy, the German Idealists sought to mediate the relationship between the universal and the particular—one of the seminal issues throughout the history of philosophy—through a developed philosophy of self-consciousness. This entailed carefully working their way through Kant’s account of the “spontaneity of the apperceptive subject.” Or, put differently, it entailed coming to terms with Kant’s reconceptualization of the relationship between freedom, reason, and self-consciousness. In essence, to understand the German Idealists is to understand how their various philosophies of self-consciousness were just as much attempts to develop a philosophy of freedom.

As mentioned above, we can in principle distinguish between the conceptual and the intuitional part of our thinking. According to Kant, concepts are grounded in the spontaneity of thinking, ultimately derived *a priori* from the transcendental unity of self-consciousness. Sensible intuitions are grounded on the receptivity of impressions.²⁷ Implicitly, for Kant, universality stands on the side of spontaneity and particularity stands on the side of receptivity.

Above we also saw that the fact that all our possible intuitions (including empirical intuitions of appearances) are unified by the self-conscious

²⁶ Longuenesse, “Kant’s ‘I Think,’” 17.

²⁷ Kant, *Pure Reason*, B93 (205).

subject places determinate limitations on possible combinations of thoughts. The “I think” grounds the combination of the manifold of intuition in a unified representation. Again, the combination itself is not given through the senses, but can be brought about only from the side of the subject itself: it is, as Kant writes, “an act of its own self-activity.”²⁸ The unity of the subject actively shapes the rules for thinking; that is, it forms concepts. And, insofar as objective (necessary) rules are called laws, we can say that, when it comes to the most basic or universal rules or concepts (causality, etc.), the understanding, the “I think,” legislates for sensible nature. This legislation, precisely as an “act of its own self-activity,” is the primary expression of the subject’s spontaneity.

Now we can distinguish between “relative” and “absolute” spontaneity.²⁹ Relative spontaneity is partially determined by receptivity: for example, a computer is capable of complex problem solving, but it relies on being “fed” a problem in order to spring into activity. Turned on, it can remain humming with its programs ready, but, lacking the capacity to spontaneously provide itself with a source of activity proper, it cannot give itself an object. In Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* there is nothing that categorically excludes understanding the spontaneity exhibited by the “I” in this way. The subject could in principle, unbeknownst to itself, be functioning like an automaton, which is encoded with a certain program—the understanding and its categories, and so on—that requires receiving externally fed stimuli such as sense impressions to spring into effect. As we saw above in the context of Kant’s critique of Descartes: as Kant insists that the “I” is a representation (however necessary) and that it therefore has a *noumenal dimension* independent of our temporarily ordered representational capacities, about which we must accordingly be silent, there remains the possibility that what the self-conscious subject perceives to be manifestations of absolute spontaneity are, in fact, merely automatic products of relative spontaneity.

This is clearly not Kant’s view. Nonetheless, what the *Critique of Pure Reason* posits as manifestations of spontaneity, implicitly suggesting that they are not determined by anything outside the subject’s own self-activity, could actually be products of an *automaton spirituale*, rather than

²⁸ Ibid., B130 (245).

²⁹ In the following, I rely in part on the problems and issues addressed in Wilfrid Sellars’s essay on Kant’s theory of apperception, “... this I or he or it (the thing) which thinks” Sellars, *In the Space of Reasons*, 411–36.

expressions of an autonomous, self-conscious “I.” The critique of theoretical reason leaves this problem unsolved. In Kant’s critical philosophy, the definitive step towards developing a full account of the freedom, the “absolute spontaneity,” of the subject is found in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, which in a sense both furthers and completes the first critique—albeit from an irreducibly distinctive perspective.³⁰

It is not that Kant no longer thinks that he has to be mindful of the distinction developed in the first *Critique* between the “I” as representation and as a thing-in-itself. Rather, he thinks that he can account for this fundamental distinction in a way that precisely *allows* him to posit the absolute spontaneity of the subject in matters of moral action (and thus indirectly reaffirm the absolute spontaneity of the subject in epistemic matters as well). As he writes in the preface:

... [T]here is now disclosed a very satisfying confirmation of the speculative *Critique’s consistent way of thinking*—one which was hardly to be expected before—inasmuch as it insisted on letting objects of experience as such, including even our own subject, hold only as *appearances* but at the same time on putting things in themselves as their basis and hence on not taking everything supersensible as a fiction and its concepts as empty of content; now practical reason of itself, without any collusion with speculative reason, furnishes reality to a supersensible object of the category of causality, namely to *freedom* (although, as a practical concept, only for practical use), and hence establishes by means of a fact what could there only be *thought*.³¹

He sees the notion of the “thing-in-itself,” operating outside the unifying scope of the temporal succession that determines natural causality, as the condition of the possibility of freedom and the absolute spontaneity of the subject.

The questions that form the second *Critique* are these: how does this causality of freedom, the absolute spontaneity, come to make itself known to the self-conscious subject? How does a “thing-in-itself” (the “I” as a *noumenon*) come to express itself in the world of appearances? And how

³⁰ “With this faculty [of pure, practical reason] transcendental *freedom* is also established, taken indeed in that absolute sense in which speculative reason needed it, in its use of the concept of causality, in order to rescue itself from the antinomy into which it unavoidably falls when it wants to think the *unconditioned* in the series of causal connection ...” Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 5:3, 3.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 5:6, 5.

does the answer to this question affect the notion of the relationship between the subject and its world that was elucidated in the first *Critique* of speculative reason?

E. Initially, if we begin to use Kant's distinctions between "understanding," "reason", and "imagination" a bit more frequently than we have until now, we can sum up the difference between the subjects of the first two *Critiques* in the following way: theoretical or speculative reason has to do with the thinking of such objects as could be given to the understanding, starting with intuitions proceeding to concepts, and culminating in an account of the principles of speculative thought (epistemology); practical reason concerns the ability to make objects real through the causality of a will that has reason as a determining ground, providing the subject with a law for determining the right action (rather than an object of intuition).³² In other words, speculative reason concerns objects given to the subject; practical reason turns on the subject's giving itself an object or end, thus generating universal and unconditional laws that determine a natural object (the empirical self).

In the first *Critique*, the role of reason was severely restricted. Proceeding through syllogistic logic, the function of speculative reason was to grasp the unconditioned, which underlies the totality of conditions for a given entity. In other words, for a given concept the function of reason is to provide a middle term, which conditions the application of that concept to an object. (Caius is a human, all humans are mortal, therefore Caius is mortal; "human" thus conditions the application of "mortal" to "Caius.") In this sense, Kantian reason is not concerned with objects given to our sense, but only with the relationship between concepts: "... [P]ure reason leaves to the understanding everything that relates directly to objects of intuition or rather to their synthesis in imagination. It reserves for itself only the absolute totality of the use of concepts, and seeks to carry the synthetic unity, which is thought in the categories, all the way to the absolutely unconditioned."³³ While this form of reasoning can be made to serve a speculative or theoretical purpose (by directing the thinking subject toward a certain unity of its concepts), it is precisely the potentially "detached" status of human reasoning that Kant seeks to restrict in the domain of theoretical knowledge, since it also leads to the illusion that we can obtain positive knowledge of things beyond the realm of possible

³² Ibid., 5:89, 76.

³³ Kant, *Pure Reason*, A326/B383, 401.

experience (such as the substantial existence of the “I think” beyond the realm of temporally structured appearances—inner and outer *sense*). Theoretical reasoning beyond the bounds of sense inevitably lands us in contradictions or, in Kant’s terminology, antinomies—mutually contradicting laws.³⁴

Still, it is only in the domain of theoretical or speculative knowledge that Kant diagnoses the illegitimate employment of reason. When we turn to practical reason it is precisely the fact that Kant conceives reasoning as an essentially formal act (an intellectual activity inherently detached from the consideration of objects of experience) which makes its use legitimate and secures its predominance in questions of moral action. And as a pure form it emerges *sui generis* from the subject itself. Moreover, that reason strives towards the unconditioned, extending ideas towards a maximum or an utmost limit, makes it well suited for determining universal principles of right action and conduct: what every rational being always ought to desire unconditionally to be done simply by virtue of being rational—without regard for particular circumstances and situations. Another way of putting this point is to say that the second *Critique* concerns the possibility that the “I think” provides itself with a practical premise that is derived solely from the logical “space” constituted by the unity of the “I” itself. It is an expression of the “apperceptive self” that is distinct from the realm of appearances, a practical expression of the “I” as a thing-in-itself.

Now any practical rule is a product of some reasoning: figuring out the right means to achieve a desired end. In the majority of cases this type of practical reasoning depends on what the subject’s particular desires happen to be and on the particular means that are given to it to bring about those ends. Yet these are contingent determinations of the will, premised on the subject’s receptivity.³⁵ In other words, at best such practical rules

³⁴ Kant thus distinguishes between two types of conceptual classification and organization in the *Critique of Pure Reason*: on the one hand, the understanding legislates over intuitions structuring our grasp of the world by means of universal laws of nature; on the other hand, reason detached from the possible objects of experience seeks to increase the systematic unity and extension of the concepts of the understanding, generating the illusion of a positive domain of knowledge beyond the possible objects of experience and a transcendental legislation of the understanding (over things-in-themselves). The first form of legislation is legitimate; the second is not.

³⁵ “Pleasure arising from the representation of the existence of a thing, insofar as it to be a determining ground of desire for this thing, is based on the *receptivity* of the subject, since it *depends* upon the existence of an object” Kant, *Practical Reason*, 5:22, 19.

bear witness only to a “relative spontaneity” in the sense discussed above. But if, by virtue of reason alone, the “I” can posit its own ends without regard for particular, subjective desires and thus legislate over the will as, in principle, detached from any concern with the mediation of material conditions and particular (empirical) objects, it would reveal an “absolute spontaneity”: presupposing only itself it would then immediately provide itself with an object or end.³⁶

F. So, whether we can legitimately posit the freedom of the subject hinges on our ability to formulate a maxim for an action that holds universally without any contradiction regardless of particular material circumstances, objects, or ends,³⁷ since “... freedom and unconditional practical law reciprocally imply each other.”³⁸ Such an intrinsic practical premise for action would show that being a rational, autonomous subject and being a moral agent are one and the same (although, as we shall see, free will—*liber arbitrium*—and morality are not identical). Keeping Kant’s definition of reason in mind, we can formulate a purely formal practical law thus: “So act that the maxim of your will could always hold at the same time as a principle in a giving of universal law.”³⁹

(In-)famously, Kant’s concrete example of a maxim that is in accord with this formal practical law is expressed in the logic of promising: the very idea of a promise entails its being kept; the act of making a promise is void of meaning if it could just as well not be kept.⁴⁰ It is therefore impossible to will it to be a universal rule that promises can be broken—even if breaking a promise would result in greater pleasure or material gain

³⁶ “... [I]t is requisite to reason’s lawgiving that it should need to presuppose only itself, because a rule is objectively and universally valid only when it holds without contingent, subjective conditions that distinguish one rational being from another.” *Ibid.*, 5:21, 18.

³⁷ “A *maxim* is the subjective principle of the volition; the objective principle (i.e., that which would serve all rational beings also subjectively as a practical principle if reason had full control over the faculty of desire) is the practical *law*.” Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), Ak 4:401, 16. See also Ak 4:421, 37, note 1, 2.

³⁸ Kant, *Practical Reason*, 5:29, 26.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 5:31, 28.

⁴⁰ “... I soon become aware that I can will the lie but not at all a universal law to lie; for in accordance with such a law there would properly be no promises, because it would be pointless to avow my will in regard to my future actions to those who would not believe this avowal, or, if they rashly did so, who would pay me back in the same coin; hence my maxim, as soon as it were made a universal law, would destroy itself.” Kant, *Groundwork*, Ak 4:403, 19.

for oneself (“I”).⁴¹ The universal maxim “one shall always break a promise, if one stands to gain from it” reduces the notion of a promise to nonsense. In other words, as a concrete instance of the pure practical law, it is a fact of reason that promises ought to be kept—not by virtue of circumstance, but by virtue of the very notion of giving a promise. Thus the unconditional practical maxim that one should always keep one’s promises.

The direction of rational moral deliberation is given by the purely formal universal law that emerges spontaneously from the “I” (the self, demarcated as the locus of responsibility and commitment, as Brandom put it in the quote above) to a particular instantiation from which it derives its content, such as determining whether or not one ought to keep one’s promises in the face of temptations not to do so. In the instantiated rule the content remains strictly conceptual, although the maxim does address particular practical deliberations and courses of action (even as a universal form it is concretely applicable to particular situations that call for moral deliberation).

From this it implicitly follows that the concepts of good and evil apply only to objects that can be effected through a free will; that is, through the will of a being that can freely determine the ends and means of its action through rational deliberation. It is the will itself that is either good or evil, irrespective of whether or not it succeeds in bringing about its object. As Kant writes: “[*G*]ood and *evil* always signifies a reference to the *will* insofar as it is determined by the *law of reason* to make something its object; for, it is never determined directly by the object and the representation of it, but is instead a faculty for making a rule of reason the motive of an action (by which an object can become real).”⁴² Morality, the ascription of the values “good” and “evil” to an action, is grounded on the freedom of the subject, revealed through the law of practical reason. In this strict sense, it is the possibility of affirming the absolute spontaneity of the rational subject which generates the image of a world in which our practical reflection and agency—and thus morality, questions of good and evil, or, simply, value judgments as the coordinates for any given action—have purchase.

G. Underlying the entire structure of Kant’s critical philosophy is a radical commitment to freedom. The objectivity of absolute spontaneity

⁴¹ According to Kant, self-love as a maxim (“I must always promote my own happiness by any means available”) cannot function as a practical premise derived solely from the spontaneity of the “I think,” since it relies on a notion of the human being as a natural creature living with its desires and conditions in full accord.

⁴² Kant, *Practical Reason*, 5:60, 52.

can be seen as the cornerstone of the entire philosophical edifice. What is so striking about Kant's thought is that this commitment to the freedom of the subject functions without compromising his analytic rigor or his insistence on positive conceptual mediation. Indeed, these commitments mutually support each other.⁴³

We find that, in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, the most basic coordinates by which we actually orient ourselves in the world spring from a suprasensible entity, the "I" as a thing-in-itself.⁴⁴ "The moral law is, in fact, a law of causality through freedom and hence a law of the possibility of a supersensible nature, just as the metaphysical law of events in the sensible world was a law of the causality of sensible nature; and the moral law thus determines that which speculative philosophy had to leave undetermined, namely the law for a causality the concept of which was only negative in the latter, and thus for the first time provides objective reality to this concept."⁴⁵ In the first *Critique*, Kant argued that the law of natural causality sprang from the spontaneity of the subject (the understanding). Yet speculative philosophy could legitimately posit only a relative spontaneity, although it had to presuppose the subject's absolute spontaneity.⁴⁶ Now the critical investigation of pure practical reason has vindicated the concept of absolute spontaneity by providing us with a genuinely objective, discursively mediated, positive concept of a free agent: a positive account of the causality of a noumenal being.

We can tie this back to the issue of inter-subjectivity, objectivity, and universality that we addressed in section C. above. For something to be objective we must be able to give a positive, inter-subjective account of it: to borrow a Sellarsian phrase, it has to occupy a place in the discursive space of reasons. From a theoretical point of view (as an entity encountered in

⁴³ Ibid., 5:6, 5.

⁴⁴ Reason ultimately determines the interests of all the powers of the mind. And in the unity of thought (the "I") pure practical reason has primacy over speculative reason, since it is the practical interest of reason that determines the ultimate ends of all rational beings. As Kant writes: "[O]ne cannot require pure practical reason to be subordinate to speculative reason ... since all interest is ultimately practical and even that of speculative reason is only conditional and is complete in practical use alone." Ibid., 5:121, 102.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 5:47, 42.

⁴⁶ "The determination of the causality of beings in the sensible world can as such never be unconditioned, and yet for every series of conditions there must necessarily be something unconditioned and so too a causality that is altogether self-determining. Hence the idea of freedom as a faculty of absolute spontaneity was not a need but, *as far as its possibility is concerned*, an analytic principle of pure speculative reason." Ibid., 5:48, 42.

the natural world), a free agent is not “something” that we can give such a positive account of on the basis of our perceptual experience of the realm of appearances. A purely theoretical point of view, from which natural causality necessarily holds for all occurrences and entities occupying time and space, excludes an unconditioned cause. Yet, as Kant shows, from a practical point of view, the very structure of our rationality provides the ground for a positive account of a self-determining agent, unconditioned by physical causes. An account of pure, practical reason determining the will springs from the most basic inter-subjective and discursive criterion that we have for being able to use concepts, from the unity of the pure understanding or “I think.”⁴⁷ As necessarily linked to practical reasoning, freedom is objective in the Kantian sense.

The universal point of view of the “I think” (the point of view of any rational, discursive being always, everywhere) can immediately determine the will of a rational agent in a particular situation that calls for practical deliberation (the particular point of view of the “I think” as a position located in time and space). As Beatrice Longuenesse writes *apropos* of this issue in the first *Critique*: “Kant’s view is ... that unity of consciousness is always both ‘my own’ *and*, insofar as it is ‘transcendental unity of self-consciousness’ whose form is that of judgment, so constituted that it is capable of transcending the point of view of ‘myself, in the present state of my perception’ to the point of view of ‘everybody, always.’”⁴⁸ From this dialectic of self-consciousness springs freedom, discursive rationality, and collective, reflective progress. And as a practical agent, the “I” mediates between the universal and the particular, freedom and rationality, as it gives shape to the world—while claiming it as its own.

H. To properly set the stage and explain how the nexus of reason, freedom, and self-consciousness evolves in the aftermath of Kant’s “critical revolution in philosophy,” I still need to take up a question that emerges as a consequence of Kant’s practical philosophy and determines his conception of aesthetics in the *Critique of Judgment*: namely, the concrete relationship between our knowledge of the sensible world and the supersensible realm of absolute spontaneity. This concerns the realization of the

⁴⁷ “[B]esides the relation in which the *understanding* stands [B] to objects (in theoretical cognition) it has also a relation to the faculty of desire, which is therefore called the will and is called the pure will insofar as the pure understanding (which in this case is called reason) is practical through the mere representation of a law.” *Ibid.*, 5:55, 48.

⁴⁸ Beatrice Longuenesse, *Kant and the Capacity to Judge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 395.

moral law in the realm of appearances: insofar as the moral law belongs to the realm of things-in-themselves and a good will can be good in itself irrespective of our physical power to bring about its object, is it irrelevant whether the supersensible freedom of the subject, in fact, has sensible effects that give expression to the moral law?

I have framed this chapter with a reference to the gradual emergence of the self-conscious subject as the interpretive key that allows Karl Barth's initial critics to discern what he is up to in his commentary on the letter to the Romans. It is important to stress that this topic transcends the problem of the "subjective constitution" of humans as thinking beings. It further pertains to the way the world itself is structured: what it (the world of objects) does or does not allow us to imagine and do. It pertains to the way the self-conscious subject finds him- or herself to be an actual, active force shaping the world of objects and relations. Thus we need to follow the development of Kant's thought in the third *Critique*, because it provides us with insight into some basic concepts and interpretive moves that turn out to be important for grasping the full scope of the intellectual context that we are outlining in this chapter.

To recount: in lieu of Kant's definition of reason, a will determined by the moral law will seek to bring about "the unconditioned totality of the objects of pure practical reason, under the name of the *highest good*."⁴⁹ "The highest good" names a state in which there is no conflict between the moral law and sensible nature (determined by the laws of natural causality), a world where a good will meets with no opposition.⁵⁰ If it were not possible to realize the moral law in the world, it would not make sense to act so as to bring about its realization. To unconditionally will something that one positively knows can never be obtained borders madness.⁵¹

Here Kant introduces the postulates of practical reason: God as author of sensible nature and the "moral cause" of the world, and the immortality of the soul that represents the possibility of infinite progress. I will return to these two Kantian ideas at a later stage, when I examine the theological consequences of German Idealism. At this point, it is sufficient to note their specific place in the critical philosophy.

⁴⁹ Kant, *Practical Reason*, 5:108, 91.

⁵⁰ See Kant, *Pure Reason*, A815/B843, 682, and A817/B845, 683.

⁵¹ As Kant points out: "If . . . the highest good is impossible in accordance with practical rules, then the moral law, which commands us to promote it, must be fantastic and directed to empty imaginary ends and must therefore in itself be false." Kant, *Practical Reason*, 5:114, 95.

The important thing to note in relation to the issue of the realization of the supersensible in the realm of sensible nature is the implicit condition that sensible nature itself must be able to express or symbolize something supersensible. Were it categorically unable to do so, a possible realization of the highest good would always appear to be a radical violation of the laws of sensible nature (a miracle) and the notion of free, moral human agency would lose its sense. The issue is thus not whether this expression or symbolization is possible, but—given the objectivity of the supersensible moral law—how it is possible.

This is a question of aesthetics, and it becomes a focal point in the last installment of Kant's critical philosophy: the *Critique of Judgment*.

I. In turning to the third *Critique* I begin by making two distinctions: first, in Kant's view, when we ask whether sensible nature is able to symbolize or express the supersensible, the sensible object is strictly understood as an occasion for discovering something about the way spontaneity can manifest itself in various ways in our theoretical and practical use of reason—and still have the same a priori ground in the apperceptive "I think." In other words, the objects of experience are important—not in themselves, but because they allow us to discover something about our thinking, to discover something about a fundamental aspect of our ability to reason and reflect.

Second, Kant outlines two forms of judgment, determinant and reflective. Abstractly, a determinant judgment subsumes a particular phenomenon in the categories; that is, we grasp a particular thing as being in accordance with the necessary laws of nature (for example, the simultaneous intuition of fire and smoke ordered in experience by means of the category of causality). Nonetheless, there are a number of ways in which things or states can be the cause of other things or states, and a number of ways in which they can have certain commonalities. The categories are general, while these further forms of specification are particular, i.e., empirically given. Hence we are faced with the possibility of infinitely various empirical laws that appear to us to be contingent.⁵² Yet when we judge in relation to these particular (empirical) laws we necessarily presuppose that they do, *in themselves*, contain the unity of a law that is *not* contingent—even if we cannot immediately grasp its necessity (for example, the growth pattern of a specific plant in a specific location). In other words, there is a demand that we must think of the objects that we combine

⁵² Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2005), 15.

in empirical laws *as if* they have a *purpose* (one that is ultimately unifying) that we ourselves can neither comprehend nor prove.⁵³ Reflective judgments presuppose this ultimate harmony of nature with our ability to think and reason, which lies outside the bounds of our understanding. Since this regulative idea lies outside the explicit rule of the categories of the understanding, its correct use depends on particular conditions or singular moments of experience. As Eli Friedlander writes: “Put slightly differently, judgment is not a matter of knowledge of abstract rules but rather constitutes a capacity that must be *exercised*.”⁵⁴ The exercise of this capacity is the focus of Kant’s third *Critique*: that is, can a correct exercise of this capacity, which is (in important respects) strictly subjective and dependent on the particular circumstances, legitimately elicit universal assent—and, if so, how?

J. To understand how Kant addresses the relationship between judgment and nature, we should briefly return to the (abstract) distinction between understanding and imagination, which I touched on above in the discussion of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Kant attributes the capacity for conceptual thought to the understanding, the “I think.” Viewed as concerned only with concepts it can, in principle, be distinguished from the imagination, which is where Kant locates the transcendental ideas of space and time; that is, the forms of sensible intuition that are at work in the images we have of the world in which we live. In the first *Critique*, one of the key functions of the imagination is to *schematize* in accordance with the categories. In Kant’s words, the schemata of the productive imagination are “... nothing but *a priori* **time-determinations** in accordance with rules, and these concern, according to the order of the categories, the **time-series**, the **content of time**, the **order of time**, and finally the **sum total of time** in regard to all possible objects.”⁵⁵ Now what does this mean?

For one thing, the emphasis is obviously on the temporal aspect of perception, and on temporal duration in particular. It expands on how a particular series of temporally determined images are held together in the mind. The imagination has a reproductive aspect, which is “... the subjec-

⁵³ Ibid. As Kant writes in the *Critique of Pure Reason*: “This highest formal unity, which rests solely on concepts of reason, is the *purposive* unity of things; and the speculative interest of reason makes it necessary to regard every ordinance in the world as if it had sprouted from the intention of a highest reason.” Kant, *Pure Reason*, A686/B714, 614.

⁵⁴ Eli Friedlander, *Expressions of Judgment: An Essay on Kant’s Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 2.

⁵⁵ Kant, *Pure Reason*, A145/B184–5, 276.

tive ground for calling back a perception, from which the mind has passed on to another, to the succeeding ones, and thus for exhibiting entire series of perceptions”⁵⁶ This reproductive aspect works according to a certain formula, since it does not merely heap images together haphazardly. It must bring them together in a way that can potentially align with our concepts.⁵⁷ In other words, it must, at the very least, be in accordance with the categories, which Kant posits as the minimal criterion for coherent cognition. It is this operation that the productive imagination carries out, structuring all possible images of sensible nature in accordance with a formula determined by the unity of the “I.”

For example, when facing an object from a certain perspective, we are simultaneously aware that, over a given stretch of time, we are able to locate ourselves so as to perceive the same object from a series of other vantage points—say, from a side that is presently hidden from view. Thus the concept of a building taken together with the concept of a perceiver that is able to occupy a series of vantage points over time provides a “family” of images. This “family” of images is the productive imagination’s “schema” for the concept of a given building.

Thus “schemata” mediate between concepts and perceptions in the sense that while all intuitions of buildings are had from a perspective located at a particular point in space and time, the concept of a building does not entail one particular perspective; the schemata add duration and extension in temporal and perspectival succession to the particular perception, and the concept of a determinate perceiver to the concept of the perceived object. Being closely related to our ability to use demonstratives, it is what allows us to indicate a concrete instantiation of a concept (“*this* is a house,” “*that* is a cat”). It “lends” the unity of a concept to the manifold of intuition—in terms of structuring a series of images. “From this it is clear that the schematism of the understanding through the transcendental synthesis of imagination comes down to nothing other than the unity of all the manifold of intuition in inner sense, and thus indirectly to the unity of apperception, as the function that corresponds to inner sense (to a receptivity).”⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Ibid., A121, 239.

⁵⁷ Keeping in mind Kant’s famous dictum: “Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind.” Ibid., CPR A51/B76, 193.

⁵⁸ Ibid., A146/B185 (276).

Again, these (more abstract) distinctions are simply a way of fleshing out what is required for us to enjoy the self-conscious, discursively mediated perceptions of the spatio-temporal world that we, in fact, have; in this case, the intelligibility of something as simple as the immediate and unproblematic acceptance of the notion that the apple that we have not yet bit into has juicy, white fruit-flesh under its red surface—as well as a backside presently hidden from view (to use an example from Wilfrid Sellars's essay on the role of the imagination in Kant's theory of experience).⁵⁹

What is important to keep in mind in lieu of the above discussion of the two forms of judgment, determinate and reflective, is that the productive imagination is able to both form schemata in accordance with concepts *and* to deliver particular schemata that can provide the subsequent ground for the relevant application of particular concepts. In the latter case we judge without already having a determinate concept at hand.⁶⁰ Instead we are exercising a subjective capacity for achieving a (form of) harmony or accord between our imagination and our discursive, intellectual capacities in the broadest sense.⁶¹ When we succeed, we experience a feeling of intellectual pleasure in the spontaneous harmony between intuitions and thoughts.⁶²

K. It is this feeling of pleasure that anchors Kant's aesthetics. There is a sense of purposiveness attached to the perception of an object when its form elicits this feeling of intellectual pleasure in us.⁶³ According to Kant, when this feeling strikes us we call the object that elicits it *beautiful*. The ability to make a singular reflective judgment on the basis of it, we call *taste*.

⁵⁹ Sellars, "The Role of the Imagination."

⁶⁰ "... [I]n some cases an object might provide an occasion for bringing together, or concentrating, schematic spaces belonging to disparate concepts and creating a harmonious whole whose proportion or measure cannot be determined by the ratio of imagination and understanding of any prior concept." Friedlander, *Expressions of Judgment*, 36.

⁶¹ "For that apprehension of forms in the Imagination can never take place without the reflective Judgment, though undesignedly, at least comparing them with its faculty of referring intuitions to concepts." Kant, *Judgment*, 20.

⁶² "Now if in the judgment of taste the Imagination must be considered in its freedom, it is in the first place not regarded as reproductive, as it is subject to the laws of association, but as productive and spontaneous (as the author of arbitrary forms of possible intuition)." *Ibid.*, 57.

⁶³ "If now in this comparison [of forms with the faculty for referring intuitions to concepts] the imagination (as the faculty of *a priori* intuitions) is placed by means of a given representation undesignedly in agreement with the Understanding, as the faculty of concepts, and thus a feeling of pleasure is aroused, the object must then be regarded as purposive for the reflective judgment." *Ibid.*, 20.

I asked above: can such judgments, judgments of taste, legitimately be expected to elicit universal assent? It should now be apparent why the answer to this question is not straightforward. As Kant writes: “The beautiful is that which pleases universally, without a concept.”⁶⁴ There is no determinate concept involved in the judgment. Nor can we reduce the feeling of pleasure in the beautiful object to our theoretical or practical interests; that is, it is not linked to an empirical (scientific) interest in the object, nor is it directly linked with a practical interest such as being an object of the will. Yet, while there is no definite purpose or rule behind it, it nonetheless exhibits a form of subjective purposiveness.⁶⁵ Its occasion is the form of a singular object that resists generalization and assimilation to a theoretical or practical interest, yet the form of the judgment “this (specific) object is beautiful” invites universal agreement.

If we hold these various claims together it suggests that beauty is an idea which cannot be definitively instantiated—*qua* being fully determined by a particular concept.⁶⁶ It is unlike the ideas of reason (freedom, the soul, God) insofar as it does not involve a notion of the totality of experience.⁶⁷ Instead it applies to singular experiences and singular objects. Thus the idea of beauty is expressed in a gap between the overall idea of beauty and its singular presentations, which leaves room for a multiplicity of instantiations without a common conceptual form. As such the singular object of an aesthetic judgment leaves room for a multiplicity of approaches and interpretations, and its universality resides precisely in the way it opens up to this multiplicity of takes.⁶⁸ Beauty opens up for conversation and reflective discourse between distinct people and perspectives. Thus the universal aspect of judgments of taste implicitly appeals to a common sense, a notion of continuous communication and mutual edification between distinct subjects who take a disinterested pleasure in the free play of their cognitive capacities.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁶⁵ “Beauty is the form of the purposiveness of an object, so far as this is perceived in it without any representation of a purpose.” *Ibid.*, 54.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 141.

⁶⁷ Maria Andreevna Gourova, “The Aesthetic Idea and the Unity of Cognitive Faculties in Kant’s Aesthetics.” Dissertation, Georgia State University, 2008, 37.

⁶⁸ “Far from damaging the universality of the aesthetic judgment, the multiplicity of takes on, say, a work of art, is precisely adequate to its nature. It is not incompatible with the idea of the universal voice but precisely expresses it.” Friedlander, *Expressions of Judgment*, 26.

L. Kant's aesthetics focuses primarily on natural beauty rather than art, since an essential aspect of his account concerns dispelling the notion that there is an unbridgeable gap between the spontaneity of our ethical life and thought and the unfolding of the natural world in space and time—that our ethical practices do not contribute to the shape of the world and vice versa. As we saw above, we have a rational interest in being able to assure ourselves of the objectivity of the ideas of reason: "... i.e. that nature should at least show a trace or give an indication that it contains in itself some ground for assuming a regular agreement of its products with our entirely disinterested satisfaction (which we recognize *a priori* as a law for everyone, without being able to base it on proofs)."⁶⁹

So, when a natural object elicits a feeling of pleasure in the spontaneous harmony of imagination and understanding, we can reflect on that object and use its appearance as an occasion to enlarge our discursive grasp of the world. Again, the aesthetic common sense forms the basis of our ability to communicate without strictly proceeding in accordance with conceptual rules determined in advance, and this allows us to experiment with giving expression to otherwise intangible concepts.

Thus the aesthetic object, as it were, provides us with a language by means of which we can seek to express a higher meaning.⁷⁰ Kant's examples: a white lily expresses innocence; birdsong expresses the joy and satisfaction of existence.⁷¹ This form of expression is inherently indirect. The intuition of the birdsong takes on the role of a symbol as we find an analogy between the singing and the intangible concept of the joy of existence. Such natural symbols are then incorporated into our everyday language and form a crucial part of our discursive grasp of the world. As Kant writes: "Our language [i.e., German] is full of indirect presentation of this sort, in which the expression does not contain the proper schema for the concept, but merely a symbol for reflection. Thus the words *ground* (support, basis), *to depend* (to be held up from above), *to flow* from something (instead of, to follow), *substance* (as Locke expresses it, the support of accidents), and countless others, are not schematical but symbolical hypotheses and expressions for concepts, not by means of a direct intuition,

⁶⁹ Kant, *Judgment*, 107.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁷¹ The pleasure that we experience in these forms of expression are conditioned on them being natural phenomena; if we were to discover that the idyllic birdsong was a recording, our feeling of pleasure would radically diminish. See *ibid.*, 108.

but only by analogy with it, *i.e.* by the transference of reflection upon an object of intuition to a quite different concept to which perhaps an intuition can never directly correspond.”⁷²

Sensible images and entities are called on to make a concept that seeks to give expression to an aspect of our abstract reasoning more tangible, to symbolize it (Kant defines *hypotyposis* simply as “rendering perceptible to the senses”). Symbols resemble schemas by relying on the inter-subjective aspect of the imagination, in that we count on others having a loosely rule-governed set of images and associations available, more or less identical with our own. Thus when we try to symbolize these intangible, supersensible aspects of our reasoning, we still rely on the inter-changeability of our first-person perspective as perceivers of sensible objects. Of course, a symbol differs from a schema insofar as it does not mediate a definite concept that would allow us to definitively demonstratively indicate the entity that is being discussed. Instead it indicates a loosely connected set of images and associations, providing an opportunity to continue an exploration of the idea of reason itself and its relation to nature.

Beauty (of both natural objects and art) can thus fulfill the function of symbol of the supersensible idea of the morally good. While there is no direct link between a beautiful object and the moral law, there are analogous, symbolic relations: both elevate the mind above the merely sensible pleasure or satisfaction and both aesthetic and moral judgments can be expected to elicit universal agreement in all thinking beings. Kant writes: “Hence, both on account of this inner possibility in the subject and of the external possibility of nature that agrees with it, it finds itself to be referred to something within the subject as well as without him, something which is neither nature nor freedom, but which yet is connected with the supersensible ground of the latter.”⁷³ Nature generates particular sensible forms that support and expand our cognitive and discursive capacities. We experience nature as having a purposiveness pertaining to our particular way of thinking, such that its specific structures and forms can easily be thought by us to be part of a much larger system. This aspect of nature is objective, inter-subjective, and yet its definitive (final) form is importantly a matter of future progress and formation.

Thus the feeling of purposiveness pertains to the way sensible nature supports and gives expression to the development of our supersensible ideas.

⁷² Ibid., 149.

⁷³ Ibid., 150.

“[T]he beauty of nature, i.e. its connection with the free play of our cognitive faculties in apprehending and judging of its appearance, can be regarded as a kind of objective purposiveness of nature in its whole as a system of which man is a member.”⁷⁴ This notion of nature as a systematic whole that includes humanity and humanity’s discursive faculty takes us beyond a restricted (theoretical) notion of the sensible world. It seems that nature has done us a favor in providing forms that help to express our own supersensible ends: to express the fact that we are rational creatures endowed with absolute spontaneity. In other words, nature seems to us to support the ideas of reason and the human understanding by being inherently open to aiding and adding to our capacity for discursive mediation. It lends its various sensible forms to the human community’s gradual expression and realization of its supersensible ideas as a laboratory of human (discursive) spontaneity.

M. Now it is important to keep in mind that on this interpretation nature *seems to support* the ideas of reason and the spontaneity of the human understanding. We cannot directly say that nature produces it. For Kant, sensible nature and the supersensible realm of rationality and spontaneity are brought together in a way that provides us with an image of human freedom realizing itself in nature by means of itself, that is, by means of rational deliberation and action. As Kant had already written in “Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose”: “Nature has willed that man should produce by his own initiative everything which goes beyond the mechanical ordering of his animal existence, and that he should not partake of any other happiness or perfection than that which he has procured for himself without instinct and by his own reason.”⁷⁵ Nature is here conceived as a vehicle enabling freedom to realize itself. This line of reflection is then further developed when its critical details are worked out in the third *Critique*.

Thus the above quote sums up the end of the argument of the critical philosophy nicely: at the end of the exposition of the spontaneity of self-consciousness we are left with the image of a cosmopolitan, cultured community engaged in arts and sciences for the purpose of living in accordance with the realization of the moral law in sensible nature as the final end of the history of the human race, understood both as rational and natural creatures. At this point, at the end of the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant’s critical philosophy spills over into social, political, and historical philosophy.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 169.

⁷⁵ Immanuel Kant, “Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose,” in *Kant: Political Writings*, ed. H. S. Reiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 43.

From the critical question of the role of skepticism and the spontaneity of the “I think,” Kant’s philosophy ultimately tells a story about the world that has the freedom of the rational subject and its ethical practices as its ultimate horizon—and in the end he must give an account of their final shape. The *Critiques* inevitably lead to an investigation into the various rational forms of cultural and political organization. It is as if the idea of the spontaneity of the subject winds up bursting what initially appears as the narrow, critical framework of the *Critiques* and ultimately directs the reader to a world-historical, political horizon: from the self to the limits of the conceivable world and back again—now armed with a socio-political purpose. For a rational being, Kant seems to say, the natural world is there for the taking.

N. Kant’s three *Critiques* place the nexus of self-consciousness, freedom, and reason on center stage. While taking the reader through the three major divisions of philosophy—ontology and epistemology, ethics, and, finally, aesthetics—from the first *Critique* onwards each new installment also substantiates underdeveloped arguments and aspects, or fills in lacunas found in its predecessor. As the first *Critique* makes the notion of the self-conscious subject play a new philosophical role, the second *Critique* can be seen to put the concept of reason developed in the first *Critique* to yet a different use in order to substantiate claims made about the absolute spontaneity or freedom of the “I think.” And when this concept of the absolute spontaneity of reason threatens to appear too otherworldly and detached from the realm of particular objects and experiences, the third *Critique* guides it back to the issue of dissolving an apparent gap between thoughts and intuitions that was the focus of the first *Critique* by means of the idea of beauty and the idea of nature taken as an organic whole. At each stage a different aspect of the engaged intellect stands revealed as the means by which the problem under discussion is (dis-)solved.

By the end of the third *Critique* the reader is by and large left with an image of the world whereby no natural object or experience stands outside the reach of the conceptual mediation of the self-conscious subject.⁷⁶ For example, the notion of the eschatological sovereignty of God is mediated through human moral self-consciousness: the notion of the final end of the world is not derived from theology—rather the final reconciliation

⁷⁶This is a critical aspect of what Dieter Henrich calls “a moral image of the world.” Henrich, *Aesthetic Judgment*.

of humanity with nature is a result of free human practical agency.⁷⁷ Furthermore, we have an idea of God, because human reason needs one; it is essentially *ours*. In this sense, there appears to be no radical, ungraspable “otherness” for the self-conscious subject; everything will sooner or later fall within the realm of our rationality and discourse.

Of course, this summary of the critical philosophy immediately needs to be qualified. Kant is the author of the (in-)famous concept of the “thing-in-itself.” And the thing-in-itself is precisely that which does not fall within the scope of the conceptual mediation of the subject.

I have deliberately left this important aspect of Kant’s philosophy in the background until now. It was important to me to show that Kant’s overall intention is to dispel the idea of a gap between the way we understand the world and the way we perceive it, a gap between thoughts and intuitions. It was likewise important to show that he largely succeeds by radically expanding the role and conceptual reach of the self-conscious subject, the “I.” Putting too much emphasis on the idea of “things-in-themselves” at an earlier point in my exposition might have risked jeopardizing a fuller appreciation of Kant’s achievements and invite accusations of skepticism, where they do not actually fit the bill.

This way of putting it does, nevertheless, suggest a way in which the accusation hits home after all: that, in spite of everything, Kant does remain vulnerable to a form of skepticism. And this recognition is one of the reasons the later idealists find it necessary to push (what they understand to be) the Kantian philosophical project further than Kant did. To explain why this is the case it is useful to make a distinction between two aspects of “things-in-themselves.”

When I first mentioned the “thing-in-itself” above it was in the context of the apperceptive “I” (the “I or he or it (the thing) which thinks”) and absolute spontaneity, where Kant distinguishes the active, apperceptive “I” from the empirical self of inner sense, which is always located in time.⁷⁸ The apperceptive “I” is the source of the unity of time and space and the categories. It is not *located in* experience, but is the *condition of the possibility* of unified experience. As such, it “stands outside” the world of the sensible and is therefore not included in the set of particular entities existing within the transcendental ideality of space and time. Furthermore, it

⁷⁷ Gilles Deleuze, *Kant’s Critical Philosophy—The Doctrine of the Faculties* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 69.

⁷⁸ Kant, *Pure Reason*, B68–9, 190.

follows that it can be thought not to be subject to the natural law of cause and effect. And if we subtract the ideas of space and time as well as the categories from our notion of an entity, we are left with a completely vacuous thought of a thing about which we can say nothing at all: a “thing-in-itself.” Kant then uses this notion of the apperceptive “I” as “thing-in-itself” as crucial leverage to get the argument for a causality that springs from absolute spontaneity off the ground in the second *Critique*.

Seen from this angle, there arises the temptation to additionally conclude that for any given entity it might also have a mode of existence that is not captured by “our” transcendentially ideal forms of space and time and the categories, a mode of existence that differs from our way of perceiving objects in space and time. Thus the way we perceive things in space and time quickly comes to appear as a subjective imposition: there might be other, different, ways in which the world of objects could appear to creatures with a differently structured subjective, conceptual apparatus. How can we then feel entitled to say that the way we perceive the world is the way the world “really” is?

This is not how Kant introduces the notion of the “thing-in-itself” in the first *Critique*—although the actual conclusion that he ultimately draws is the same. Kant does not proceed from the apperceptive subject as a “thing-in-itself” to objects in general also being “things-in-themselves.” Instead, pushing back against Humean skepticism, he has argued that the “I (think)” is an objective condition for all actual cognition, and that the unity of the “I” must inform our sensibility if a sensible manifold is to become an object for us.⁷⁹ That is, for objects of experience to be thinkable they must exhibit a form of unity that reflects the unity of a thinking subject. And in the first *Critique*, in the Transcendental Aesthetic, Kant argued that for our part the form of unity exhibited in our sensibility is the unity of time and space. But he also explicitly suggests (in both the A and the B editions) that it is a contingent fact about us that we happen to be so constituted that we perceive objects spatio-temporally. That is, it is a *subjective fact* about us—not a property of the world of objects. Kant writes: “What may be the case with objects in themselves and abstracted from all this receptivity of our sensibility remains entirely unknown to us. We are acquainted with nothing except our way of perceiving them, *which is peculiar to us*, and *which therefore does not necessarily pertain to every being*,

⁷⁹ Ibid., A158/B197, 283.

though to be sure it pertains to us [emphasis added].”⁸⁰ Space and time is the way we happen to structure experience, but this merely reflects a fact about our particular, subjective constitution—not an objective fact about the world as it is in itself. So, it is an objective fact about us that the world *seems to us* to be spatially and temporally structured. But, powerful as this conclusion is, it obviously leaves open the question whether the world then *in fact* is as we subjectively perceive it to be. In fact, as Kant suggests, there might be a myriad of other, alternative ways that the world could appear to other thinking beings with differently structured sensibilities.⁸¹

Here there is room for skepticism about whether the mind reaches all the way to the objects themselves, or whether it stops short. And, if we follow Kant, the most likely conclusion is that the mind does in fact stop short, that the picture that Kant has painted of the relationship between our thoughts about the world and the world itself can be described as a form of “subjective idealism.”

As mentioned, I have left this more detailed account of “things-in-themselves” to the last part of my treatment of Kant’s critical philosophy to demonstrate how an essential aspect of Kant’s project is to use the notion of the apperceptive subject to overcome a particular form of skepticism about the relationship between our minds and the world. I wanted Kant’s achievements in this regard to stand out clearly. Another reason was that it allows me to point out how Kant, nonetheless, fails to fully achieve this goal and ultimately never moves beyond the horizon of a subjective idealism that remains open to the charge of skepticism. This opening is what prompts the later German Idealists (most explicitly Hegel) to take up Kant’s project and push his thoughts further than Kant was willing or able to do.

One important reason that Kant did not himself reject the idea of “things-in-themselves” was that it helped him construct his positive

⁸⁰ Ibid., A42, 168; B59, 185.

⁸¹ John McDowell puts the point nicely: “The most Kant might be able to claim universally, about sensibility as such, is that any sensibility—at any rate any sensibility that partners a discursive intellect in yielding empirical knowledge—would allow the formation of pure intuitions, reflecting the way the sensibility is formed as the formal intuitions of space and time reflect the way our sensibility is formed. But in his picture it remains *a sort of brute fact about us*—given from outside to the unifying powers of apperceptive spontaneity, and not determined by their exercise (not even in the extended sense of being intelligible only in a context that includes their exercise)—that the pure intuitions that reflect the forms of our sensibility are intuitions of space and time” (emphasis added). John McDowell, “Hegel’s Idealism as Radicalization of Kant,” in *Having the World in View*, by John McDowell, 69–89 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

account of the absolute spontaneity of the subject in the second *Critique*. When it comes to practical reason, the strictly formal rationality of the apperceptive subject, unconcerned with particular objects or experiences, legislates unconditionally. In its practical use, reason can prescribe universal rules of action independently of how things are with the particular subject and its particular situation, experience, and desires. If this pure practical reasoning and the causality of the will that it determines spring from a subject considered as a “thing-in-itself,” the idea of absolute spontaneity is (at least provisionally) justified.⁸²

Now the later Idealists sought to reject this idea of reason as an operation detached from the realm of the particular. They thought that it threatened to place reason in a sphere that operates separately from the realm of experience and history. Instead of actually striving to be holistic, rationality risked appearing to be abstract and “one-sided,” to use a Hegelian term. And further, if one began to dismantle the idea of “things-in-themselves,” then the idea of reason operating at a distance from the realm of appearances also became increasingly difficult to maintain. The later Idealists wanted to preserve Kant’s philosophical advances without having to commit to the idea of things-in-themselves and free, practical rationality as an essentially formal operation. The problem facing them was how to preserve the commitment to the freedom or absolute spontaneity of the self-conscious subject while simultaneously rejecting the two basic ideas that appeared to make this commitment possible within the Kantian system. We could say that in their philosophy they wanted to be more Kantian than Kant—and that in order to do that they found that their various philosophies had to become something else entirely. In fact, if there is one later work that matches this description in particular, it is Fichte’s *The Science of Knowledge*. But so do Hegel’s major works, which seek to navigate the waters between the Scylla of Kant and the Charybdis of Fichte. I turn now to this development and the eventual pinnacle of German Idealism.

⁸²That is, it cannot be excluded on theoretical grounds, while it can be justified on practical grounds. Even in Kant’s day this argument was quite controversial, and he had to defend his position. See for example Kant’s essay “On the Common Saying: ‘This May be True in Theory, but it does not Apply in Practice,’” in *Kant: Political Writings*, ed. H. S. Reiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 61–92.

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Fichte and Hegel on Knowledge and Self-Consciousness

It is one of the profoundest and truest insights to be found in the Critique of Pure Reason that the unity which constitutes the nature of the Notion is recognized as the original synthetic unity of apperception, as unity of the I think, or of self-consciousness.
G. W. F. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, “The Notion in general”

In Chap. 3, I suggested how and why Kant’s immediate philosophical inheritors found it necessary to reformulate and elaborate on his transcendental idealism. I have suggested that their worries were at least somewhat justified. I have now left Kant’s philosophy behind and will briefly discuss the work of Fichte and (even more briefly) Novalis, before I turn to the philosophy of G. W. F. Hegel, who is the true subject of this chapter. In writing on Hegel, I want to focus on the second part of *The Science of Logic*, “The Subjective Logic,” and the sections on judgment and syllogism in particular.

I began Chap. 3 by pointing out that most of the important early reviewers of Barth’s *Commentary on Paul’s Letter to the Romans* sought to understand Barth’s text by relating it in some way to the modern figure of the self-conscious subject. I argued that if we are to understand this common interpretive move, we have to understand the reflections concerning the self and the world developed by German Idealists. This allowed me to provisionally justify my particular framing of the development of Barth’s thinking in my turn to the philosophical tradition of German Idealism

from Kant onwards. Ultimately, I suggest that a most fruitful way to read Barth's theology is to do so in relation to the nexus of reason, freedom, and self-consciousness, and that we should describe Barth as a speculative theologian.

Barth knew Kant's work well. He certainly also knew and appreciated the poetry and prose of Novalis. He had read Hegel and would positively compare aspects of Hegel's work to his own. Whether he was equally well acquainted with the works of the other German Idealists is open to question. It is therefore easier to justify a detailed treatment of Kant than, say, a detailed treatment of Fichte in a work that ultimately concerns the structure and development of Barth's theology.

Still, the history of ideas is interesting because ideas are "in the air" so to speak and exert their influence whether later actors are intimately acquainted with them or not. And when it comes to the reception of Kant and the development of the nexus of ideas mentioned above, the air proved to be thick with Fichte. Thus when Barth later explicitly turns against a particular understanding of the role of the self-conscious subject and the scope of its conceptual mediation—as I will show when I explicitly take up his work—he is also reacting against certain developments that are best explained by reference to Fichte's reception of Kant. This is why I have found it useful to introduce my chapter on Hegel by reference to Fichte's philosophy and its reception by the Romantics exemplified by Novalis.

Kant's thinking provides the most basic framework of, as well as some crucial building blocks for, my account of Barth's speculative theology. Therefore I have treated Kant's philosophy in some detail. My treatment of Fichte's ideas will be briefer, since they also serve partly as a foil for providing a fuller picture of Hegel's thought.

FICHTE

A. At first glance, Fichte's *Science of Knowledge* from 1794 can justifiably be described as lacking clarity of presentation and being poorly structured.¹ This makes the argumentation appear to be careless and even

¹“His thought, which may be difficult enough to follow on the clearest exposition, is obscured by the vagueness and the ambiguities of his writing. Bad punctuation, idiosyncratic sentence structure, and a dismaying overabundance of non-functional expletives interfere with the task of understanding, and it is ironic that a thinker in whose philosophy the require-

downright inconsistent at times. Nonetheless, Fichte's general line of reflection and his overall argument are relatively clear from the beginning, even if the particular premises and conclusions that make up its individual building blocks do not always appear convincing or clear. In one sense, we should say that Fichte is aiming more at painting a particularly convincing image of how thinking selves experience the world than providing a rigorous argument for the correctness of this image. For example, when he introduces the *Science of Knowledge* by opposing "idealism" to (what he terms) "dogmatism," his main concern is giving a precise and convincing account of our experience of the world and ourselves, starting from the idealistic standpoint of immediate self-consciousness, and thus showing how unconvincing the alternative is by comparison. Dogmatism stands for an object-centred and materialistic form of philosophy that wants to explain the world and our relation to it that begins with things as they supposedly are in themselves without any appeal to human self-consciousness. Roughly, his view is that if we don't start with the notion of self-consciousness, but instead begin by asserting the brute reality of objects that exist independently of their appearance to a self-conscious thinker, we will never obtain an adequate idea of self-consciousness. And since he thinks that it is an unquestionable fact that we are self-conscious beings, such an approach cannot but appear absurd. Therefore, as Fichte writes, "... the Science of Knowledge sets out from an intellectual intuition, that of the absolute self-activity of the self."² I will discuss what this entails in a bit more detail below.

First, to start from this "idealist" position is to follow in Kant's footsteps although, as Fichte repeatedly insists, this does not entail taking Kant as an authority. This would run counter to the core ideas of the *Science of Knowledge*, namely, that (1) its system self-evidently follows from careful introspection, and that (2) through this introspection we find the essence of the self, its self-activity, to be a form of absolute spontaneity.³ Thus in a programmatic statement from the first introduction Fichte writes: "My writings

ment of unity plays such an exalted role, could have endowed this work with no more readily discernible structure than it displays." Peter Heath and John Lachs, from the Preface to J. G. Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), vii.

² Fichte, *Science of Knowledge*, 44.

³ "This notion of the self-positing activity of the I is Fichte's interpretation of the Kantian notion of autonomy." Marina Bykova, "The Self as the World Into Itself: Towards Fichte's Conception of Subjectivity," in *Fichte, German Idealism, and Early Romanticism*, eds. Daniel Breazale and Tom Rockmore (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010), 137.

seek neither to explain Kant nor to be explained by him; they must stand on their own, and Kant does not come into it at all. My aim—to express it directly—is not the correction and completion of the philosophical concepts now in circulation, whether anti-Kantian or Kantian; it is rather the total eradication and complete reversal of current modes of thought on these topics, so that in all seriousness, and not only in a manner of speaking, the object shall be posited and determined by the cognitive faculty, and not the cognitive faculty by the object.”⁴ This is a question of both philosophical presentation and method. Fichte suggests that Kant’s own account of his philosophical method in the *Critique of Pure Reason* is largely unhelpful and that one should instead concentrate on Kant’s actual philosophical practice: the transcendental method as it comes to expression in Kant’s actual analysis and deductions.⁵

To understand how Fichte construes the transcendental method I turn to his account of the role of logic in the *Science of Knowledge* (in part, a critical dialogue with Reinhold’s use of the principle of identity). Fichte’s text can initially appear confusing, because even the rules of logic have to be grounded transcendentially in the intellectual intuition of the self-activity of the self and cannot be presupposed.⁶ As Nectarios Limnatis writes: “We have to show that the forms which are established within logic really are the forms of a particular content within the *Wissenschaftslehre*. Logic, therefore, derives its validity from the *Wissenschaftslehre*, but the validity of the latter is not derived from the former.”⁷ Thus, in the analysis of the logical principle of identity ($A = A$)—the starting point of the *Science of Knowledge*—Fichte argues that logical identity is actually an expression of the foundational principle “Ego = Ego.” The principle of identity as an

⁴Fichte, *Science of Knowledge*, 4.

⁵Daniel Breazeale, “Fichte vs. Kant on Transcendental Method,” in *Fichte, German Idealism, and Early Romanticism*, eds. Daniel Breazeale and Tom Rockmore (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010), 46.

⁶“To think and to determine objects ... are exactly the same thing; the two concepts are identical. Logic provides the rules for this determination; and hence, I should have thought, it presupposes determination in general as a fact of consciousness. That all thinking has an object can be shown only in intuition. Think, and attend in this thinking to the way you do it; you will undoubtedly find that you counterposit to your thinking an object thereof.” Fichte, *Science of Knowledge*, 68.

⁷Nectarios Limnatis, “Fichte and the Problem of Logic: Positioning the *Wissenschaftslehre* in the Development of German Idealism,” from *Fichte, German Idealism, and Early Romanticism*, eds. Daniel Breazeale and Tom Rockmore (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010), 26.

instantiated law “must be given to the self, and since it is posited absolutely and without any other ground, must be given to the self by the self alone.”⁸ That is, the identity of $A = A$ presupposes an activity in the self on the self, so to speak. Understanding this activity presents the self in a dual role: as both acting and acted upon. This parallels the dual role of the self in introspection as both observer and observed pure I. Each presupposes its actual underlying identity as positing and posited. It is this, the self’s own positing of itself as a pure activity, that underlies and grounds all other acts of knowledge. “Consciousness is coming to be in its activity. Activity is the way in which the I realizes itself.”⁹

B. As I mentioned in Chap. 2, Kant had already recognized that all rational discourse must be analyzed as an activity (a view he takes over from Rousseau). Fichte thinks he has shown why this is, in fact, necessarily so. In the form of a primordial act, the spontaneity of the self-conscious subject is the foundation of all knowledge, both theoretical and practical. And since such an act grounds the principles of discursive rationality, it cannot itself be in conceptual form. Rather, it must be known as an immediate intellectual intuition. Insofar as the self posits itself it subsequently becomes possible for the self to reflect on itself. Thus theoretical knowledge depends on a primordial form of practical agency.

Now Fichte also argues that from the self-identity of the self (Ego = Ego) a relationship between the self and the not-self follows. Again Limnatis puts it nicely: “By accepting that the I equals to the I, it can be derived that the not-I is equal to not-I, and then that the I is not equal to the not-I ($I = I$; $-I = -I$; $I \text{ not} = -I$). Thus, the self is opposed to the external manifold.”¹⁰ This is, in its essence, Fichte’s transcendental argument for the existence of a manifold standing in opposition to the self: a self, which can now appear to itself as finite (a limited, empirical self-consciousness).¹¹ From this we derive the notion of a subject and an object, even though we remain strictly within the bounds of what can be said on the basis of

⁸J. G. Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 95.

⁹Nectarios Limnatis, “Fichte and the Problem of Logic: Positioning the *Wissenschaftslehre* in the Development of German Idealism,” from *Fichte, German Idealism, and Early Romanticism*, ed. Daniel Breazeale and Tom Rockmore (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010), 32.

¹⁰Limnatis, “Fichte,” 33.

¹¹“The distinct characteristic of the selfhood is the ability to reflect upon itself; yet, the reflection is conceivable only as the reflection upon a limited and determinate object.” Bykova, “The Self,” 140.

immediate self-consciousness.¹² “Self and not-self, as equated and opposed through the concept of their capacity for mutual limitation, are themselves both something (namely accidents) in the self as divisible substance; posited by the self, as absolute, illimitable subject, to which nothing is either equated or opposed.”¹³ In one sense, Fichte’s account of the subject seeks to present it as we usually experience it: a finite and limited being. But, in another sense, it is grounded in a transcendental intuition of the self as absolute and infinite—as absolutely spontaneous and free. As in Kant’s thinking, this tension between absolute spontaneity or freedom and determinate knowledge and reflection resides at the center of human self-conscious existence. And this is not something to be explained away, but, rather, a precise description of the minimal condition of any knowledge whatsoever. According to Fichte, the difference between his system and Kant’s is that he has given a much more precise description of how and why, at any given moment, our knowledge will be determinate and limited, while also stressing that there can be no absolute limits to what can be known, since knowledge is grounded in freedom.

C. Before finishing my very brief account of Fichte’s philosophy, I acknowledge one important aspect of Fichte’s thinking that I have yet to address: the issue of things-in-themselves.

As I mentioned at the end of Chap. 2, the later Idealists sought to preserve Kant’s key philosophical insights while rejecting the idea of things-in-themselves and the idea of practical reason operating at a distance from historically given contexts and experiences of moral deliberation. In light of my brief account of the basics of Fichte’s thought, we can now see the contours of his argument against the existence of things-in-themselves.

As mentioned above, Kant understands things-in-themselves to be material substances (as they exist) unshaped by the spatio-temporal structuring of our subjective perceptual apparatus. In other words, he argues that our particular subjective constitution necessarily bars us from acquiring particular knowledge of how things are; such a form of knowledge is potentially available to be had—just not by creatures like us.

¹²“The self posits absolutely an object (a contrasted, counter-positing not-self). In the mere positing of this it is therefore dependent on itself alone, and on nothing else The self is now absolutely bounded: but where does its boundary lie?... It depends entirely on the spontaneity of the self, posited by the word ‘absolutely’. The boundary lies wherever the infinite self posits it to be. The self is finite, because it is to be subjected to limits; but it is infinite within this finitude because the boundary can be posited ever farther out, to infinity.” Fichte, *Science of Knowledge*, 228.

¹³Ibid., 117.

Fichte's straightforward response to that idea is that "the thing-in-itself is a pure invention and has no reality whatever."¹⁴ In the introduction to *The Science of Knowledge*, Fichte argues that the thing-in-itself should be viewed as a leftover from a baldly empiricist dogmatism, which presupposes its existence to lift its particular picture of reality off the ground. "The idealist destroys this proof by explaining experience in another way: thus he denies precisely what the dogmatist relies on. The thing-in-itself becomes completely chimerical; there no longer appears to be any reason at all to assume one; and with this the entire edifice of dogmatism collapses."¹⁵

By giving an account of knowledge as, at each moment, concretely finite *and* infinite, and arguing that the self-conscious subject encounters negativity only in the form of an act of limiting itself, Fichte appears to have "explained experience in another way." Steven Hoeltzel puts it nicely: in Fichte's view, "experience's immanent contents neither directly reveal any irreducibly extra-subjective entities nor support any non-circular inference to the existence thereof; and experience's only viable explanation proceeds without once invoking any entity of the sort, with the result that our necessary representations of non-conscious causal determinants of understanding and aspiring receive a philosophical explanation strictly and solely in terms of states and activities of self-articulating finite intelligence and will."¹⁶

We encounter an image of an independently existing reality only through our practical agency, when the world that we inhabit can appear as an obstacle to our various pursuits, an obstacle that eventually ought to be assimilated within the sphere of the free activity of the self. And once we contemplate our world theoretically, the same objects that impeded our practical pursuits cease to be obstacles and can be brought within the scope of the self-conscious I.¹⁷

Now an important critical aspect of Fichte's overall argument is that any attempt to disregard either the practical or the theoretical point of view, for the sake of constructing a metaphysics free from potential contradictions concerning the status of the not-self, stands revealed as (to use a modern term) "ideology." The subject acts on a world of objects, which

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁶ Hoeltzel, "Critical Epistemology," 92.

¹⁷ "Only to the extent that anything is related to the practical faculty of the self, does it have independent reality; so far as it is related to the theoretical faculty, it is incorporated in the self, contained within its sphere, subjected to its laws of presentation." Fichte, *Science of Knowledge*, 248.

can be engaged because the condition for encountering something as being objective is a product of the subject (acting on) itself.¹⁸ This nexus entails that self-consciousness oscillates between the theoretical and practical perspective on the self and its world of objects, whereas the practical approach entails an encounter with objects as obstacles that can be seen to limit its striving. This limiting of or boundary to the self's striving falls away when the world of objects is viewed from a theoretical perspective. "Hence the ideal self oscillates with absolute freedom over and within the boundary. Its bounds are wholly indeterminate."¹⁹ It is in light of these reflections that Fichte posits the *creative imagination* as the active ground of self-consciousness, since it is what holds together the practical and theoretical faculties. As Fichte writes: "We should reflect neither on the one aspect alone, nor on the other alone, but on both together, oscillating inwardly between the two opposing determinations of this idea [of the self]. And this is the business of the *creative imagination*."²⁰

So when we get into the actual arguments of Fichte's *The Science of Knowledge*, his more qualified view of things-in-themselves is that they prove to be a necessary "invention" that springs from the way we hold our theoretical and practical knowledge together in the unity of self-consciousness.²¹ The important point is that the thing-in-itself ceases to be an absolute boundary to our thought, and becomes a productive condition for the self's encountering and acting on itself as both finite and infinite. In Fichte's system the thing-in-itself stands for the actual possibility of determinate thought and reflection; the possibility of actually knowing ourselves as finite selves without invoking a realm of *irreducibly* extra-subjective entities.

D. In light of this very short account of some key aspects of Fichte's early philosophy, how are we to understand his contribution to the development of German Idealism? Is he, as he argues, merely reformulating the crucial Kantian insights and thus demonstrating how—through such a reformulation—we can leave the last remnants of pre-critical dogmatism

¹⁸ "The subjective is transformed into something objective; and conversely, everything objective is originally something subjective." Ibid., 274.

¹⁹ Ibid., 278.

²⁰ Ibid., 250.

²¹ "The thing-in-itself is something for the self, and consequently in the self, though it ought *not* be *in the self*: it is thus a contradiction, though as the object of a necessary idea it must be set at the foundation of all our philosophizing, and has always lain at the root of all philosophy and all acts of the finite mind ..." Ibid., 249.

behind? Or does Fichte's system take its readers in a completely different direction from Kant's and, ultimately, lead us down a philosophical *cul de sac*? I want to argue (uncontroversially, perhaps) that Fichte's philosophy proved to be both a reformulation of Kant and a philosophical *cul de sac*: Fichte brings out aspects of Kant's philosophy that allow a thinker like Hegel to reconceive the Kantian project in yet another way, avoiding the potential obscurantism of Fichte's system.

The problem with Fichte's system is not necessarily the claim that all experience is an expression of the unity of self-consciousness. Even if Fichte's interpretation of that proposition goes well beyond what Kant seems to have had in mind, his early transcendental arguments in *The Science of Knowledge* can be fairly convincing.

On my reading, the most significant problem is that while in Kant the paradigmatic expression of the unity and spontaneity of self-consciousness is the understanding, in Fichte this part is played by the creative imagination: the system rests on intuitions rather than concepts. Thus Fichte effectively severs the Kantian link between self-consciousness and discursive conceptual mediation. As Fichte continues the quote above concerning the role of the creative imagination: "The science of Knowledge is of a kind that cannot be communicated by the letter merely, but only through the spirit; for its basic ideas must be elicited, in anyone who studies it, by the creative imagination itself; as could not, indeed, be otherwise, in a Science that penetrates back to the ultimate grounds of human knowledge, in that the whole enterprise of the human spirit issues from the imagination, and the latter cannot be grasped save through the imagination itself."²² What Fichte implies is that the paradigmatic expressions of self-consciousness are feeling and intuition rather than judgment, thoughts, and concepts. In the relationship between the self and the non-self, we intuit a manifold that does not correspond to the primordial unity of self-consciousness with itself (Ego = Ego). To make it eventually correspond is a practical task to be accomplished. It is at this juncture that the issues of rationality and coherence begin to appear problematic in Fichte and a tendency towards obscurantism sneaks in.

For Kant, absolute spontaneity—the active part of our intellectual life—is primarily tied to the faculty of concepts, the understanding, or "I think." Saying that the understanding is active is saying that there is always a moment of freedom or plasticity in how we conceptually engage

²² Ibid., 250.

with the manifold of intuitions. And Fichte explicitly rejects this view. He writes: “The understanding is a dormant, inactive power of the mind, the mere receptacle of what the imagination brings forth, and what reason determines or has yet to determine; whatever may be told of its doings at one time or another.”²³ The understanding is merely (among other things) a passive receptacle for the determinations of reason or intuition. This effectively implies that we can imagine exercises of rationality (determinations of reason) that are independent of the discursive faculty of the understanding—effectively, reasoning without concepts. And it means that we can encounter intuitions of the manifold that are outside the potential scope of conceptual mediation. By consistently appealing to what are in effect extra-discursive forms of knowledge that ground the subject and rejecting the free activity of the understanding, Fichte has based his philosophical system on a form of subjectivity that resists being brought within the scope of inter-subjective discursive mediation. And this entails that whatever is posited as objective in Fichte’s system ultimately stands revealed as subjectively shaped in a way that makes its full conceptual mediation appear deeply problematic. For all we know, our actual perceptions of objects could lack any real objectivity. To put it in Hegelian terms, the subject does not genuinely encounter itself in objective form.²⁴

This development is a consequence of Fichte’s reformulation of Kant, which sought to remedy what appeared to Fichte as a deficit of subjectivity in relation to the realm of objects. While Kant’s account of the spontaneity of self-consciousness provided the key to overcoming naïve empiricist realism and the skepticism that inevitably follows from it, he had also limited the scope of the knowing subject and posited the idea of an extra-subjective existence of objects. In other words, there existed things or states of affairs that the subject was essentially barred from perceiving. Fichte’s remedy is to radically expand the intuitive scope of the subject, such that all of reality is generated out of the self’s relation to itself. But the way he does it ultimately leaves it a mystery how something could actually be known to be

²³ *Ibid.*, 207.

²⁴ “The Ego does not find itself in its appearance, or in its positing; it must annul its appearance in order to find itself as Ego. The essence of the Ego and its positing do not coincide: *Ego does not become objective to itself.*” G. W. F. Hegel, *The Difference Between Fichte’s and Schelling’s System of Philosophy* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1977), 123. I should note that Hegel’s critique of Fichte varies from mine in certain respects, although there are also significant overlaps and the conclusion is much the same.

objective—there is no objective, inter-subjective counterpart to the intuitive subjective spontaneity.

What Fichte's system lacks is a conceptually mediated equipoise between subject and object. Interestingly, its subjectivist form springs from a desire to remedy a corresponding lack of equipoise in Kant's philosophy. The imbalance is already in Kant, and Fichte's reformulation can be seen simply to shift the weight radically to the opposite pole.

In Fichte, a central aspect of the issue concerns the relationship between knowledge and conceptual mediation. One of the most problematic formulations is the suggestion above that there is a form of self-consciousness to be had without the active involvement of the power of the understanding. In Kant, on the other hand, reason is essentially an abstract power that is detached from our concrete experiences; it simply brings together concepts according to syllogistic logic and must be curtailed by the understanding to avoid drawing unreasonable conclusions. But in both accounts, rationality is understood to be operating in light of a less than full picture of the experience of the thinking subject, either in a manner that seems essentially subjective or in a manner that seems essentially detached from the point of view of any particular subject's experience. In other words, a proper equipoise between subject and object seems to depend on concretely bringing rationality, conceptual mediation, and actual experience into operation together in a way that does not compromise or reduce either of the three.

It is precisely an approach along these lines that Hegel invokes in his programmatic statement in the preface to the *Philosophy of Right*: "What is rational is actual; and what is actual is rational."²⁵ I will shortly turn to Hegel's speculative philosophy and examine how he suggests that we bring about this rationally mediated equipoise between subject and object. This will be the culmination of my account of German Idealism and will conclude the first part of this book. But first I want to draw some very general lines from Fichte's thought to the later context of Barth's theology, and I will do this by briefly drawing on the work of the Romantic poet and thinker, Friedrich von Hardenberg or, as his penname would have it, Novalis.

E. At the end of the third chapter, I noted that with Kant's philosophy the thinking subject emerges as the key to understanding the structure of the world and our relation to it. It is, in an important way, the thinking

²⁵ G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 20.

human subject that imbues both the sensible and super-sensible world with the meaning that opens it up to investigation and management to be shaped by our various pursuits. Fichte's philosophy radicalizes that insight. It drops the implicit assumption that there are some extra-subjective material entities that exist in splendid isolation unaffected by whether or not there are self-conscious subjects, and thus it explicitly makes the shaping of the world the shaping of our own self-consciousness. It cuts out what appeared to Fichte as a superfluous philosophical detour.

Now I have argued that Fichte's philosophical system is a *cul de sac*. As a direct philosophical approach it does not get us very far. Nonetheless, it does reveal something important about the implicit aims and arguments of the philosophical development of the German Idealists and their contemporaries. That the issue of the actual existence of extra-subjective entities could be viewed as a superfluous detour and the omnipresence of the self could be considered a tenable program shows us that, ultimately, the most important concern was the self-formation of the self-conscious subject.

Certainly, we must conclude that this is the paramount concern at the end of Kant's critical philosophy. But with Fichte, it is where we begin, *and* what we are concretely examining, *and* where we end up. And whatever could be seen as a distraction from that, such as things-in-themselves, can without much trouble be thrown overboard as dead weight. Now, whatever else we might think of it, Fichte's system shows us that a perceived absolutizing of the self is something we can potentially live with if it yields a workable theory of the self-formation of the self-conscious self.

This aspect of Fichte's philosophy shows us how it could be an intuitive move on the part of Barth's early reviewers to seize on the issue of the self-conscious subject as a key to his thought. It does not, of course, show us that it was a justified move, but it shows us how a certain spirit had emerged that could easily make it seem acceptable. I am not arguing that Barth's early reviewers were Fichteans. I am arguing that Fichte's philosophy is a far-reaching example of a modern spirit that had the power and development of the self as its principal concern. And most of Barth's early reviewers were sons of that spirit.

Now an interesting thing happens when the human self takes on this important role on the intellectual stage: mortality takes on a new philosophical importance and death becomes almost an epistemic principle. Death emerges as an absolute limit to any particular self-consciousness, and this negativity shapes our consciousness of what it is to be a living self, located in a particular space and time. It allows this singular life to emerge

as something that can be imbued with particular meaning and a particular formation. This is precisely what Fichte's erstwhile interlocutor, the poet Novalis, aims at with his famous dictum: "Death is the Romanticizing principle of our life. Death is minus, life is plus. Life is strengthened through death."²⁶ And as he further writes in his *Miscellaneous Observations*: "Life is the beginning of death. Life is for the sake of death. Death is at once the end and the beginning—at once separation and closer union of the self."²⁷ Novalis's philosophy and poetry take form in part in a critical dialogue with Fichte's philosophy and his reflections on death can be read as a critical discussion of what he saw as Fichte's unbridled subjectivism.

A full picture of what the self is must somehow include death as a condition of meaningful thought and action. Thus Novalis's poetic masterpiece, *Hymns to the Night*, weaves together Christian soteriological history with meditations on the transformative power of reflecting on death and dying. Death initially terrorizes an unreflective life of immediacy, but upon reflection it awakens the subject by throwing a light on its ability to affirm its commitments, most notably love, beyond its own particularity, its own space and time. Death becomes the principle that shows how human normative judgments (the principal expressions of self-consciousness) can be lifted into the sphere of universality. Of course, this is only a possibility, and making this "Romantic" affirmation has the structure of a wager.

I will consider Novalis's works in greater detail later in this book, when I discuss some of the aesthetic consequences of Barth's speculative theology. For now I simply want to note that, with the increased importance of self-consciousness in intellectual life in modernity, death emerges as a concept that can play the part of a limit to subjectivity.

With the mention of Novalis, I have already turned to the immediate reception of German Idealism after Fichte. And here the most important figure is arguably G. W. F. Hegel. I turn now to his philosophy.

HEGEL

The story I am telling about German Idealism and the role of self-consciousness concludes with a reading of the third and last part of Hegel's *Science of Logic*, "The Subjective Logic." I want to reveal how Hegel

²⁶ Novalis, *Philosophical Writings*, trans. and ed. Margaret Mahony Stoljar (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997), 154.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

radicalizes the Kantian insights concerning self-consciousness and develops an understanding of rationality and freedom that avoids some of the pitfalls that troubled the earlier idealists. By the end of this chapter I will have assembled all the building blocks necessary to establish how Karl Barth's speculative theology both critiques and develops the nexus of freedom, reason, and self-consciousness that forms the backbone of German Idealism.

First, I examine Hegel's overall critique of Fichte and Kant. Then I adopt a somewhat more concrete approach as I consider Hegel's own sketch of his philosophical system in the "Introduction" to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and follow a particular strand of his argument that explicitly addresses the emergence of self-consciousness into the body of the *Phenomenology*. Finally, I turn to his accounts of judgment and reason in the *Science of Logic*, where Hegel unfolds his version of Rödl's Idealist nexus of freedom, reason, and self-consciousness in detail.

A. First, I turn to Hegel's account of Fichte and its conceptual consequences. Above I already briefly alluded to the focus of Hegel's critique of Fichte's system: the lack of equipoise between subject and object. According to Hegel, Fichte's absolute subject (Ego = Ego) cannot appear to itself in objective form and thus its relation to the world of the not-self, the manifold of its intuitions of objects, is that of a never-ending striving to bring it fully within its own scope—an endless attempt to assimilate the non-Ego by the Ego. As Hegel writes in the 1801 essay, *The Difference Between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy*: "It is impossible for the Ego to reconstruct itself out of the opposition between subjectivity and the X that originates for it in a non-conscious producing, and so become one with its appearance. This impossibility is what is expressed in the fact that the highest synthesis revealed in the system is an *ought*. Ego *equals* Ego turns into Ego *ought* to equal Ego. The result of the system does not return to its beginning."²⁸ Throughout his work Hegel holds that a system of thought that leaves us with "oughts" of this type thereby reveals itself to be failing in some significant way. The "ought" reveals an inherent disjunction between what the system is meant to do and what it can actually accomplish.

For both Fichte and Kant, full knowledge of the actual relationship between the self-conscious subject and its world can emerge only as a promise, something that might become clear one day. For Hegel, this

²⁸ Hegel, *Difference*, 132.

cannot, strictly speaking, count as knowledge: simply put, if we have to wait and see what the relationship might be, we don't actually know. As we have seen, according to Kant, when it comes to a full comprehension of the relationship between the subject and the world itself, waiting and seeing is the best we can do—all things considered. And part of Hegel's challenge is to ask how Kant knows—positively knows—that this is, in fact, the best we can do.

Both the *Phenomenology of Spirit* from 1807 and the *Science of Logic* from 1812 are meant to give an account of our knowledge *as knowledge* without any epistemic reservations: what Hegel calls “absolute knowing.” When we get to the end of either of these two books, we will know what knowledge is—in truth, as Hegel would say. Thus in the introduction to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* Hegel characterizes the modest “wait-and-see-approach” as exhibiting a “fear of truth”: “It presupposes the representation of cognition as an instrument and as a medium as well as the difference between ourselves and this cognition; above all it presupposes that the Absolute stands on one side and cognition on the other, independent and separate from it, and yet is something real; or in other words, it presupposes that cognition which, since it is excluded from the Absolute, is surely outside of the truth as well, is nevertheless true, an assumption whereby what calls itself fear of error reveals itself rather as fear of the truth.”²⁹

Such formulations suggest that absolute knowing is not (necessarily) the grand metaphysical construct that many readers of Hegel have often assumed. It is more fruitful to see it as a form of intellectual engagement with the world (including self-consciousness) that steers clear of a metaphysical commitment to a radical difference between a realm of thought and what thought is of—mediated by an instrumental approach to consciousness. In other words, absolute knowing can be viewed as the *letting go* of a certain form of metaphysical commitment. Of course, this does not entail that engaging the world from a position of absolute knowing is free from all metaphysical commitments or that it is an immediate common sense view of the world (whatever that might be). It is rather that the metaphysical commitments proceed from the progressive experiences of consciousness engaging the world and that metaphysics is concrete lived

²⁹ G. W. F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1988), 58, and *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 47.

experience as it were explaining itself.³⁰ This is programmatic, but it will do as an initial indication of the general direction of Hegel's philosophical project, which I now need to flesh out in greater detail.

B. So, what does it mean to say that the system explains itself and in so doing dispenses with a particular kind of metaphysical presupposition? The short Hegelian answer is that we need an account of how our knowledge is tried and measured against itself—and not against some external standard, such as an assumed realm of entities residing outside the scope of our knowledge. When we come to believe that a state of affairs obtains and our reasoning about it has been correct nothing else is needed for our belief to count as actual knowledge. The Hegelian formulation is that knowledge (of, say, a thing) has to be *in and for itself* (*an und für sich*). This is the Hegelian counterpart to the Kantian thing-in-itself: once we know something as it is in and for itself the idea of it as a thing-in-itself beyond the scope of our knowledge of it dissolves.

In the introduction to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* Hegel begins his story about the emergence of knowledge in and for itself with a claim about consciousness and its would-be limits: “What is limited to a natural life is not by itself able to go beyond its immediate existence, but it will be driven from it by something else and this being driven beyond is its death. Consciousness on the other hand is for itself its concept and thus it is also immediately a going beyond the limited; and as this limited belongs to it, it also goes beyond itself.”³¹ Here Hegel sets up a contrast between a merely sentient being, which is bound to its sensed environment, and a sapient being, which can act in relation to a world beyond its sensibly given surroundings. And he argues that it is precisely the fact that “consciousness is for itself its concept” that allows it to actively relate itself to states of affairs that are outside the scope of its immediately given environment. In other words, the notion of knowledge in and for itself is grounded in a particular self-relation that is constitutive of consciousness.

³⁰In *Hegel's Critique of Metaphysics* Beatrice Longuenesse puts this point very well: “The critique I am attributing to Hegel is not the determination of the powers and limits of reason, supposed to be the indispensable preliminary to assessing any claim to metaphysical knowledge. Rather, it is the exposition of the very concepts of metaphysics, not in order to relegate them to the prop room of a dismissed dogmatism, but rather in order to call upon them to account for their own place and role in the activity of thinking.” *Hegel's Critique of Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 4.

³¹Hegel, *Phänomenologie*, 63. My reading of the *Einleitung* to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* takes its general direction from John McDowell's philosophical readings on Hegel.

Now—putting a slightly different spin on some of what I wrote in the chapter on Kant—a paramount aspect of having a concept of oneself *as* oneself is to be in a relation where one knows how things stand with oneself in a way that is both unmediated and singular, and thus significantly different from the way one knows about any other object.³² This is because in self-consciousness I am not *perceiving* how it is with the object of my thought—I simply *am* that object.³³ In Kantian terms, my self-conscious knowledge is spontaneous. Of course, there is a way of applying concepts whereby one is not immune to error in one’s application; and there is a way in which I can apply concepts to *myself* and yet not get things right: I can also have receptive knowledge of myself.³⁴ We need both aspects of knowledge to be able to refer to ourselves: first and foremost, spontaneous knowledge of one’s self, but also some measure of receptive knowledge of one’s self as an embodied being.³⁵ We need to invoke a form of self-conscious knowledge that does not involve observation (paradigmatically, in intentional action). But this aspect of self-consciousness cannot be completely independent of self-conscious knowledge about how things stand with the singular body located in a particular time and space that I am—and this body that I am can be the object of observational knowledge.

The point here is that in being self-conscious one has an unmediated relationship to oneself as a singular, embodied being with a particular location in time and space. The ability to refer to oneself and one’s knowledge in this way thereby enables one to consider how the world would be *anyway* without it being the object of one’s particular perception.³⁶ As Hegel writes: “With the individual the beyond is also posited—if only besides the limited as in spatial intuition.”³⁷ Again, “the limited” refers back to what

³² For example, if I know that I intend to bake a cake, I cannot be mistaken about who is intending to bake a cake, nor about what it is that I am intending to do; if I know that I am in pain, I cannot be mistaken about who is in pain, nor about whether or not I am in pain.

³³ Sebastian Rödl, *Self-consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 9.

³⁴ For example, in my knowledge of myself, or of my actions, achieved by observation. This can happen when I explicitly refer to myself as the particular spatiotemporally located body that I am: when I say that I weigh 79 kilos and it turns out upon further inspection that, sadly, I weigh 80 kilos—although here, again, I cannot be mistaken about whether it is *my body* (the body that I am) to which the concepts are mistakenly being applied.

³⁵ Gareth Evans, *Varieties of Reference* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 256, 261.

³⁶ This is not to say that it is possible to conceive of the world free from any point of view at all. The idea of a world without any position from which it is known—a view from nowhere—is itself incoherent. I will discuss this in greater detail later.

³⁷ Hegel, *Phänomenologie*, 63.

is limited to a natural life. Consciousness is also, in part, such a natural life—although, by being for itself its concept, it also transcends it. And, again, its transcending its natural life depends precisely on its own self-awareness as distinguishable from its awareness of its surroundings, such that consciousness entails having the idea of a potential gap between how things are and how one takes them to be.³⁸ And, as Hegel argues, this idea can in principle be as simple as awareness of one's own particular spatial location in relation to the sensible experience of one's surroundings.

With this step we have *de facto* arrived at an understanding of how knowledge acquired through self-consciousness generates its own measure of correctness. "Consciousness simultaneously *distinguishes* itself from something, and at the same time *relates* itself to it, or, as it is said, this something exists *for* consciousness; and the determinate aspect of this *relating*, or of the *being* of something for a consciousness, is *knowing*. But we distinguish this being-for-another from *being-in-itself*; whatever is related to knowledge or knowing is also distinguished from it, and posited as existing outside of this relationship; this *being-in-itself* is called *truth*."³⁹ We can now see how a progression towards a unity of knowledge and truth is in principle possible, how the goal of this progression could be called absolute knowing, and how the progression itself could be described as the "Science of the experience of Consciousness," which was Hegel's initial title for the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

C. In light of these preliminary and programmatic remarks, I wish to note three points before turning to *Science of Logic*, a work that spells out the details of this speculative dialectic in greater detail. First, an important aspect of Hegel's (in-) famous use of the term "contradiction" precisely invokes the potential disjunction between how something appears to consciousness and the concept on which consciousness grounds its appearance, that is, how an object's nature or essence determines its appearance in a particular way.⁴⁰

³⁸ As John McDowell writes in his essay, "*Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*": "For there to be mental states with objective content, their possessor must have the idea of objectivity, which is the idea of that potential gap between how things are and how one takes them to be. That puts in place a dependence of objective knowledge on at least a potential awareness of the state of one's own mind, how one takes things to be." *The Engaged Intellect* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 153.

³⁹ Hegel, *Phänomenologie*, 64, and *Phenomenology*, 52.

⁴⁰ There is more to Hegel's use of "contradiction"; it also turns on the relationship between unity and multiplicity, or universality and particularity, in conceptual mediation. I will examine these aspects in greater detail when I turn to the *Science of Logic*.

Contradiction arises, when—on more careful examination—we find that our account of how something is in itself fails to explain its actual appearance. Or, put differently, we give an account of its appearance that eventually makes it a mystery how it could actually be something in and of itself.⁴¹ Throughout the *Phenomenology of Spirit* consciousness again and again finds itself embroiled in such contradictions between what consciousness takes itself to know and what consciousness actually perceives. Now the awareness of this possible disjunction immanent to consciousness suggests the possibility of a confluence—also immanent to consciousness. And this outlines a measure of the attainment of absolute knowledge, the goal of the *Phenomenology*.

D. This leads directly to the second point about Hegel's account of consciousness: we have found that according to Hegel the measure of truth comes packed with consciousness; it relies on a distinction that is immanent to our form of knowing. As he writes: "Consciousness provides its own criterion from within itself, so that the investigation becomes a comparison of consciousness with itself; for the distinction above all falls within it."⁴² This needs to be spelled out a bit. I will return to the issue of self-consciousness and judgment in greater detail when I take up the *Logic* later in the chapter, but for now a few preliminary comments will be helpful.

In the "Introduction" Hegel gives two interrelated reasons that the emphasis on consciousness does not lead us to draw the "subjectivist" conclusion that our thoughts cannot reach all the way to the objects themselves. For one thing, the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is the science of the experience of consciousness.⁴³ This is to say that—from a certain point of view—consciousness *is* the object of our investigation, and this is one object that we find ourselves having access to as it is both in and for

⁴¹ Hegel's account of the journey of consciousness to reach the desired state of knowledge in and for itself is philosophical, epistemological. The transitions between the various "shapes of Spirit" that make up the *Phenomenology* pertain to the relationship between self-consciousness and its world. Still, we can draw analogies and use examples from the philosophical borderlands that bring out the structure of the transitions in knowledge—as Hegel himself does throughout the work. To stay within the realm of perception (broadly speaking), as an example of the first kind mentioned above consider the various accounts of the planetary movements prior to the revolution brought about by the New Sciences. As an example of the second kind consider the various failed attempts at producing a neurophysiological account of self-consciousness that label it an epiphenomenon.

⁴² *Phenomenology*, 53.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 56.

itself, even if we have to learn what that actually means.⁴⁴ Furthermore, since the distinction between the for-us and the in-itself is *our* distinction, a mark of our being as sapient creatures, and is inherent to our knowledge of any object, we find that when our knowledge of an object changes, the object changes as well.⁴⁵ This progression of experience certainly applies when the object of investigation is consciousness itself, but it also extends to other objects of investigation. When we realize that what we took to be knowledge of an object as it is in itself was merely an aspect of the object as it is for us, our initial reflection cannot be sustained as an account of the object as it is in itself: a new conception now occupies that position or moment in the dialectic. Furthermore, what we now understand to be a feature of its appearance for us becomes an additional aspect of what must be considered with regard to how it is in itself—that this aspect is now part of its appearance expresses something about its being in itself, its essence.

Precisely because what an object is in itself is a plastic category that serves as a moment in a dialectic immanent to consciousness it cannot serve as a representation marking the limits of our knowledge. In other words, it cannot do what Kant's thing-in-itself is supposed to do. On the contrary, it functions precisely as an immanent measure of the correctness of our reflections. Hegel writes: “[S]ince what first appeared as the object sinks for consciousness to the level of its way of knowing it, and since the in-itself becomes *being-for-consciousness* of the in-itself, the latter is now the new object. Herewith a new pattern of consciousness comes on the scene as well, for which the essence is something different from what it was at the preceding state. It is this fact that guides the entire series of the patterns of consciousness in their necessary sequence.”⁴⁶ Once this is acknowledged we can embark upon the path to absolute knowing. We do not have to add anything to the process and it was a mistake to think that we did: the distinctions that are inherent to the consciousness of a sapient

⁴⁴I will return to this below when I take up Hegel's account of the emergence of self-consciousness in the fourth chapter of the *Phenomenology*. We will see that we need to tell a story about how self-consciousness can be in and for itself to consciousness. It requires work.

⁴⁵“*Inasmuch as the new true object issues from it, this dialectical movement which consciousness exercises on itself and which affects both its knowledge and its object, is precisely what is called experience [Erfahrung].*” Ibid., 55 (emphasis in the original).

⁴⁶Ibid., 56.

creature are themselves all we need. In fact, we have only to watch as the dialectic unfolds.⁴⁷

Now until consciousness has achieved absolute knowing, once a particular shape of consciousness has run aground the subsequent emergence of a new object will remain mysterious to the succeeding shape of consciousness. To the successor shape it seems to simply appear from nowhere. As Hegel puts it, its origin happens, as it were, “behind the back of consciousness.”⁴⁸ There is thus a constant stylistic tension in Hegel’s text between the various portrayals of particular shapes of consciousness and the perspective of the writer, who acts as a witness to the entire progression. This accounts for the sometimes-confusing polyphony of voices that make their appearance in the *Phenomenology*.

E. This leads to the third point regarding consciousness I will discuss before turning to the *Science of Logic*. An important issue is how self-consciousness itself comes to appear on stage. Telling the right story about its emergence can place self-consciousness fully within the world and undermine the persuasiveness of Kant’s argument for understanding the apperceptive subject as a quintessential thing-in-itself. This again has consequences for how we frame the cultural (and religious) achievements of self-conscious agents. It is a problem, which occupies one of the most famous parts of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*: “Independence and Dependence of Self-consciousness: Lordship and Bondage.” As a concrete example, it makes the Hegelian dialectic more tangible. Because the section is quite challenging I will stay on its surface and restrict myself to the general form of Hegel’s argument: his overall aim is to place self-consciousness fully within the world of appearance.

Being conscious entails being self-conscious: the being-in-itself of an object (in other words, objectivity) turns out to be a moment in a dialectic of knowing that cannot get off the ground without self-conscious awareness. Thus: “With self-consciousness, then, we have entered the native realm of truth. We have now to see how the shape of self-consciousness first makes its appearance.”⁴⁹ The issue here is how we can come to grasp something as subjective and individual (inner) in the experience of

⁴⁷ “[N]ot only is a contribution from us superfluous, since Notion and object, the criterion and what is to be tested, are present in consciousness itself, but we are also spared the trouble of comparing the two and really testing them, so that, since what consciousness examines is its own self, all that is left for us to do is simply to look on.” *Ibid.*, 54.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 104.

self-consciousness also as an objective (outer) fact, that is, how subjectivity can appear as an inter-subjective concept. How does something as paradigmatically “for itself” as self-consciousness come to appear as something that an individual self-consciousness can conceive of as existing even if that individual self-consciousness (counterfactually) did not exist?

This is not a separate topic from the question of how self-consciousness comes to be *as such*. For something to be is for it to be both in itself and as an appearance for a consciousness; a thing’s actual being is discoverable only in the dialectic of these two given modes. If self-consciousness is to appear as something that can exist in itself, it must be conscious of existing *for* another, separate consciousness. Here “appearance” turns into “acknowledgment (*Anerkennung*).”⁵⁰ The concept of acknowledgment thus provides the overall frame for the actual appearance of self-consciousness.

Importantly, self-consciousness must be acknowledged as something that, in principle, can be distinguished from merely experiencing the world from a particular point of view. The challenge is for consciousness to recognize that, although self-consciousness cannot exist without there being particular self-conscious creatures, if we are to grasp it as an “in itself” we must be able to subtract the concrete lived experience of any given individual self-conscious “I” from this set without negating the actuality of self-consciousness. A moment of counterfactual abstraction is an unconditional requirement for self-consciousness to appear (to itself). As Hegel writes: “The presentation of itself, however, as the pure abstraction of self-consciousness consists in showing itself as the pure negation of its objective mode [*sich als reine Negation seiner gegenständlichen Weise zu zeigen*], or in showing that it is not attached to any specific existence, not to the individuality common to existence as such, that it is not attached to life.”⁵¹ Strange as it sounds, for me to recognize someone else as self-conscious, I must recognize that self-consciousness is not simply identical with the actual experience of being me. Or that self-consciousness, unlike the immediate experience of a natural life, *is not reducible* to being a particular object in the world.

To make this explicit Hegel introduces the life-and-death struggle. Two creatures on the verge of actual self-consciousness have to engage

⁵⁰ As Hegel programmatically states at the beginning the section: “Self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged.” *Ibid.*, 111.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 113.

simultaneously in a mortal struggle for a self-consciousness to appear to another self-consciousness as able and willing to transcend its immediate existence, to show itself as essentially *exceeding a natural life*. For one of them the outcome of the struggle is death, which leaves the surviving self-consciousness alone without an enduring notion of self-consciousness as it is in-itself (over against how it appears to itself). What is required is a social structure of sustained interaction between self-conscious beings. This emerges when some of the burgeoning self-conscious beings withdraw from the struggle to save their natural lives, without which their self-consciousness is anyway lost. This retreat inaugurates the famous distinction between lord and bondsman.⁵²

This social relation does not complete the progression. If self-consciousness is to appear as something in itself it must be concretely available as an enduring object, which includes and yet transcends (*Aufhebt*) the natural life. In the emerging social relation the serving consciousness (*der Knecht*) has realized that while self-consciousness is irreducible to a natural life, it cannot exist independently of it. It lives in fear of its death, which can be inflicted by the lord at any time. It has the figure of the lord as pure negativity, a being strictly for-itself, as a concrete object.⁵³ “Furthermore, [the slave’s] consciousness is not this dissolution of everything stable merely in principle; in his service he *actually* brings this about. Through his service he rids himself of his attachment to natural existence in every single detail; and gets rid of it by working on it.”⁵⁴ In work, in the bondsman’s concrete social practice, the negative relationship to the natural world is given form and shape, and the natural life is transformed into a life that is shaped by self-consciousness. This continuous, objective affirmation of self-conscious mastery gives permanence to the negative relation to nature.⁵⁵ The natural life becomes a

⁵² Ibid., 115.

⁵³ In a bit more detail: the lord gains independence from the conditions of a natural life by having the bondsman produce the good that sustains him under the threat of death. This provides the bondsman with the opportunity to realize that his entire being is contingent by continuously facing the possibility of his own demise at the hands of the lord, and, simultaneously, having an image of an existence for itself beyond a natural life available for reflection at the same time. Both of these distinctive forms of negativity are concretely present to be contemplated by the bondsman. Ibid., 115ff.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 117.

⁵⁵ “Work, on the other hand, is desire held in check, fleetingness staved off; in other words, work forms and shapes the thing. The negative relation to the object becomes its *form* and something *permanent*, because it is precisely for the worker that the object has independence. This *negative* middle term or formative *activity* is at the same time the individuality or

“life of culture,” and is primarily an expression of self-conscious activity and only secondarily (indirectly) an expression of the determinations of the natural world. Self-consciousness might still be conditioned by the contingencies of the determinations of the natural world, but it learns to master them as it cultivates its environment. Hence self-consciousness becomes available to consciousness in a form that is both in itself and for itself, and the dialectical progression towards the truth of self-consciousness (what it truly is) can begin. By constructing this philosophical myth of the emergence of self-consciousness, Hegel appropriates the Kantian picture of nature as a vehicle enabling freedom to realize itself as outlined in the “Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose.” In doing so Hegel places self-consciousness wholly within the actual world as the mark of a genus that has a second nature in addition to its first nature.

I will return briefly to this issue in the next chapter, when I consider the role of death in Barth’s theology. With this concrete example of the dialectic at work in the bag, I want to leave the *Phenomenology* behind and turn to the *Logic*. Having given a sketch of the mechanics of the Hegelian dialectic and its relation to self-consciousness, I must now venture into territory that is a bit more technical.

E. Initially, Hegel planned the *Science of Logic* to be the second installment of a four-part philosophical system, the *System of Science*. The *Phenomenology* was to be the introduction that (more or less “pedagogically”) led its readers to leave behind a one-sided picture of how the mind and the world are related and adopt a correct, speculative understanding instead. Next would come the *Science of Logic*, followed by a philosophy of nature and a philosophy of spirit (the two concrete sciences).⁵⁶ Hegel never managed to fully realize his grand systematic project—although his three-part “textbook,” the *Encyclopaedia*, serves as an abbreviated outline of what would have been.

What matters most is that the *Science of Logic* presupposes the key insight of the *Phenomenology*; the supposed division between a world of thought and a world of objects, appearances, and things-in-themselves, turns out to be illusory. Rather, an object or thing in itself is actually a

pure being-for-self of consciousness which now, in the work outside of it, acquires an element of permanence. It is in this way, therefore, that consciousness, *qua* worker, comes to see in the independent being of the object its own independence.” *Ibid.*, 118.

⁵⁶ G. W. F. Hegel, *Science of Logic* (London: Routledge, 1969), 29.

particular way that the object is given to thought. Since the *Phenomenology* has shown that there is nothing that stands radically outside the reach of our self-conscious capacity for conceptual mediation and knowledge, a full account of what there truly is will be the same as an account of what knowing is. This is the *Science of Logic*, which Hegel defines as “the science of pure thought, the principle of which is *pure knowing*, the unity which is not abstract but a living, concrete unity in virtue of the fact that the opposition in consciousness between a self-determined entity, a subject, and a second such entity, an object, is known to be overcome; being is known to be the pure Notion in its own self, and the pure Notion to be the true being.”⁵⁷ Excluded from the *Science of Logic* is engagement with concrete history, particular events, and particular objects, experiences, intuitions, or feelings. Using the Kantian distinction, we can say that the *Logic* is (first and foremost) concerned with knowledge by spontaneity and (largely) excludes what can be known only receptively. And since the radical division between subjective and objective has proven to be untenable, its scope far exceeds Kant’s account of knowledge by spontaneity. As Hegel writes: “This Notion is not sensuously intuited or represented; it is solely an object, a product and content of *thinking*, and is the absolute, self-subsistent object [*Sache*], the logos, the reason of that which is, the truth of what we call things; it is least of all the logos which should be left outside the science of logic.”⁵⁸ For Hegel, “logic,” then, is the study of the rules governing the concept or thought’s self-determination, which on examination turns out to be the self-disclosure of being. In other words, the subject of the book is the spontaneity and plasticity of self-conscious thought as the principle of what there actually is.⁵⁹

Put differently, the aim of the *Science of Logic* is explicitly the investigation of the nexus of reason, freedom, and self-consciousness, which Sebastian Rödl has termed the heart of German Idealism. Ascertaining the importance of this nexus was the task of the *Phenomenology*. Expounding its actuality and implications is essentially what the *Logic* is about.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁵⁹ “What we are dealing with in logic is not a thinking *about* something which exists independently as a base for our thinking and apart from it, nor forms which are supposed to provide mere signs or distinguishing marks of truth; on the contrary, the necessary forms and self-determinations of thought are the content and the ultimate truth itself.” *Ibid.*, 50.

⁶⁰ If I can use a metaphor: if the *Phenomenology* is a labyrinth that ultimately leads the reader to absolute knowing, the *Science of Logic* is the labyrinth’s architectural blueprint abstracted from all material particularity.

In order to distance himself from the subjectivist connotations of the concept of “self-consciousness,” Hegel insists on referring to the subject of the *Logic* as thought having itself for content, or as “infinite thought untainted by the finitude of consciousness,” but it amounts largely to the same thing.⁶¹

G. The *Science of Logic* quite obviously turns out to be a difficult book. It will therefore be helpful to give a short overview of its parts before diving into the content. This is especially important because I will focus primarily on the second volume, “The Doctrine of the Notion,” passing by “The Doctrine of Being” and “The Doctrine of Essence.”

The first two parts of the *Logic* (Being and Essence) together comprise the first volume of the work, the “Objective Logic.” As a post-Kantian, Hegel understands his own philosophy as determined by a particular “before and after”: there is a “former metaphysics” and—by implication of the adjective “former”—a “present” metaphysics, although Hegel rarely invokes the term directly to describe his work. The first metaphysics is pre-critical; the second has incorporated some form of (loosely) Kantian critique. Thus Hegel writes: “The objective logic, then, takes the place rather of former *metaphysics* which was intended to be the scientific construction of the world in terms of *thoughts* alone.”⁶² The objective logic is still a scientific construction of the world in terms of thought alone, so in one sense the basic philosophical intention is the same. The difference is that it has now become obvious that the classical version of such an account cannot stand alone—it will necessarily prove to fail in some way—since it has neglected the crucial contribution that the nexus of freedom, self-consciousness, and reason makes to any account of how things hang together. Thus, Hegel argues, an actual account of substance on its own will automatically turn into an immanent critique by considering the relevant concepts in “their nature and worth, in their own proper character.” When one subtracts the implicit ontological commitments that were taken for granted in pre-critical philosophy (the soul, the world, and God) and simply examines the metaphysical concepts without this support, they will reveal their own inherent insufficiency. He writes: “Objective logic is therefore the genuine critique of them—a critique which does not consider them as contrasted under abstract forms of the *a priori* and the *a posteriori*, but considers the determinations

⁶¹ Hegel, *Logic*, 63.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 63.

themselves according to their specific content.”⁶³ We could say that an account that insists on operating without any presuppositions turns into the most effective mode of critique.

Turning very briefly to the overall structure of the first volume, the first part on Being is an account of thought-determinations that appear to be immediately given in objects (such as the One, the Many, Quantity, and Measure); the second part on Essence concerns the relations between thought-determinations that constitute unified thinking (such as Identity, Difference, Ground, Appearance, the Absolute).⁶⁴ Nonetheless, in the first volume “essence” is still defined over against “being,” which shows us that one cannot simply be reduced or assimilated to the other. Thus, at the end of the first volume of the *Logic*, the dialectic reveals that the relationship between appearance and essence must be taken up and comprehended in a unity that encompasses both: the unity of self-conscious thought or the Notion (*das Begriff*).⁶⁵ In Hegelian terms, we are brought to the point of realizing that being and thought do not fall asunder into indifferent, self-external substances, but appear instead in a unity of self-conscious thought as the distinct “logical” moments of the universal, the individual, and the particular.⁶⁶

Every individual thing that is given to self-conscious thought is grasped under these three (logical) aspects, and a thing becomes intelligible precisely by manifesting the relationship between these aspects as inherently plastic.⁶⁷ Hegel writes: “These three totalities are, therefore, one and the same reflection, which, as *negative self-relation*, differentiates itself into these two, but in a *perfectly transparent difference*, namely, into a *determinate simplicity* or *simple determinateness* which is their one and the same identity. This is the

⁶³ Ibid., 64. Here I must once again mention Longuenesse’s insightful account of Hegel’s critique of metaphysics in *Hegel’s Critique*, 4.

⁶⁴ As Longuenesse puts it: “[T]he transition from ‘Being’ to ‘Essence’ is the transition from determinations which seem to exist by themselves and to be immediately present in ‘things’, to the revelation that the apparently most ‘immediate’ determinations are always constituted and organized in the context of a unified process of thinking.” *Hegel’s Critique*, 7.

⁶⁵ “One and the same unity of thought organizes the immediate presentation of things and the understanding of their relations: both being and essence are products of the concept.” Ibid.

⁶⁶ Hegel, *Logic*, 571.

⁶⁷ Here “plasticity” entails that thought is open to being reshaped and molded by changing conditions and contingencies. It can develop and gain determinations, and yet remain identical with itself as it takes on a new shape.

Notion, the realm of *subjectivity* or of *freedom*.⁶⁸ This, once again, is programmatic and abstract, and it needs to be unpacked. We need to see how this dialectic *actually* plays out. I turn now to the third part of the *Science of Logic* and the two sections on judgment and syllogism in particular.

H. The third book and second volume of the *Science of Logic* is, according to Hegel, devoted to “the exposition of how the Notion builds up in and from itself the reality that has vanished in it.”⁶⁹ We are to proceed from the Notion as an abstraction, an empty form, to a full account of it as the source of actual knowledge by spontaneity, and thus the principle of the intelligibility and being, of that which is.

Beginning with the nonconcrete thought of a bare understanding, we will see how an account that explicitly proceeds from knowledge acquired through spontaneity results in a full picture of actuality, one that avoids invoking an extra-conceptual given. As Hegel writes: “The Notion in its formal abstraction reveals itself as incomplete and through its own immanent dialectic passes over into reality; but it does not fall back again onto a ready-made reality confronting it and take refuge in something which has shown itself to be the unessential element of Appearance because, having looked around for something better, it has failed to find it; on the contrary, it produces the reality from its own resources.”⁷⁰

Although we begin with the bare abstraction of a pure understanding, it is important to note that what Hegel means by “the Notion” at the end of the *Subjective Logic* will be that which allows us to grasp reality as intelligible through and through without appealing to any brute immediacy beyond the discursive reach of the self-conscious subject. Hegel is not arguing for an assimilation of everything to a ready-made idea of “the conceptual,” but rather is pushing forward a dialectical critique of immediate (abstract) assumptions about what it means to fall within that sphere. It does not entail reducing everything to something merely subjective, even though what it is for something to be intelligible is at the very least to be such that it is not precluded from potentially figuring in a particular subject’s reasoning about what to believe. It is in this sense that the nature of the Notion and the nature of self-consciousness are the same.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Hegel, *Logic*, 571.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 591.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 591f.

⁷¹ “It is one of the profoundest and truest insights to be found in the *Critique of Pure Reason* that the *unity* which constitutes the nature of the *Notion* is recognized as the *original synthetic* unity of *apperception*, as unity of the *I think*, or of self-consciousness.” *Ibid.*, 584.

That said, we should be open to letting “conceptual” mean whatever it has to mean to dispel any temptation to fall into a picture of thinking that invokes an element exterior to the space of reasons to explain how we come to have true knowledge.⁷² This obviously requires a dialectical critique of limited, or in Hegelian terms “one-sided,” views of what the conceptual is. We must examine our conceptions of the concept to see whether they can ultimately serve as adequate forms of knowledge. This is the role of judgment for, as Hegel writes, “[t]he judgment is the *determinateness* of the Notion *posited* in the Notion itself.”⁷³

I. The challenge in this part of the *Logic* is to hold on to the unity of thought, while conceiving the conceptual sphere as constituted by a form of immanent negativity: to preserve the unity of the Notion as well as the manifold of actuality in all its various determinations without downplaying either. We must see our way to affirming difference as an essential part of actual unity.

What actual unity is, Hegel argues, is expressed in the power and plasticity of self-differentiation: it consists in an elastic relationship between moments held together by the Notion, rather than bald oneness. Shedding light on the dialectic of judgment is a first step in revealing how the unity of the conceptual is best defined as self-related negativity.⁷⁴ In order to draw this out, I will focus on two parts of Hegel’s analysis of judgment: his use of infinite judgments (tautologies) and the final section, the judgment of the concept or *Das Urteil des Begriffs*.

Initially, a judgment presupposes the immediate existence of a given, singular subject, whose predicate is an abstract–universal property. Hegel’s example is “The Rose is Red.” This statement is empty—we could just as easily posit that “The Rose is not Red,” meaning that it is completely indifferent to the Rose’s actually being a Rose whether it is red or some other color (Yellow, Pink, or White). We make progress only when we make a negative infinite judgment: “The Rose is not a Dog.” Of course, the infinite negative judgment seems absurd, because it is a roundabout

⁷² “[F]or the logic of the *Notion*, a completely ready-made and solidified, one may say, ossified material is already to hand, and the problem is to render this material fluid and to rekindle the spontaneity of the Notion in such dead matter.” *Ibid.*, 575.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 623.

⁷⁴ “The judgment is the self-diremption of the Notion; *this unity* [of the Notion] is, therefore, the ground from which the consideration of the judgment in accordance with true *objectivity* begins. It is thus the *original division* [*Teilung*] of what is originally one; thus the word *Urteil* refers to what judgment is in and for itself.” *Ibid.*, 625.

way of simply stating that “The Rose is a Rose”—a positive infinite judgment and a straightforward tautology. Here, Hegel claims, we arrive at the beginnings of a correct understanding of the conceptual.

How can a tautology be a sign of conceptual progress? Hegel’s answer is that with the infinite judgment the immediately given subject “is posited for the first time as a *determinate determinateness* It is through the mediation of the negative and infinite judgments that it is for the first time *posited* as an individual.”⁷⁵ The infinite judgment reveals that the only truly satisfactory predicate of the subject is the subject itself—although this initially seems to leave us with a contentless form.

As an individual, the subject is an absolute negativity ($I = I$), but on inspection the structure of the tautology shows us that the subject reaffirms itself in its predicate and becomes determinate by being able to occupy both positions in the judgment. The positions are formally distinct, but are nevertheless moments of the same determinate concept, which (changing philosophical terms) serves as both form and content. Infinite judgment shows us that there is a difference that is constituted by a form of identity, and vice versa.

In light of this, Hegel concludes that difference is as much a part of identity as identity is a part of difference. Both are moments in an actual unity. The Notion *is* a self-relation, and this entails an immanent moment of difference. “[H]ereby there is *posited* what the *copula* of the judgment contains, namely, that the qualitative extremes are sublated in this their identity. Since however this unity is the Notion, it is immediately sundered again into its extremes and appears as a judgment, whose terms are no longer immediate but reflected into themselves.”⁷⁶ The judgment of reflection, which is the next step in the dialectical progression, thus holds together two notions that have already been determined as identity in difference, as being able to serve as both form and content.⁷⁷

Nonetheless, the high point of the first form of judgment that Hegel considers is a tautology, and as much as it reveals a deeper dialectical structure more obviously needs to be said. With the speculative reading of the tautology, Hegel is close to Fichte’s formulation concerning the Ego = Ego.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 642.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 643.

⁷⁷ “It is in the judgment of reflection that we first have, strictly speaking, a determinate content, that is, a content as such; for the content is the form determination which is reflected into identity as distinct from the form in so far as this is a distinct determinateness—as it still is in the judgment.” Ibid., 643.

And, as we saw above, Hegel's criticism of Fichte was that the Ego was abstract and that the attempt to bring the manifold of particular intuitions within its scope could not succeed. It remained an imperative—an empty “ought”—that could not be realized because of the way Fichte had defined it in relation to objects of experience. In the rest of the chapter on judgment, Hegel aims to show how the imperative to bring the manifold of objects of experience within the scope of the Notion is actually realized, and how the Notion's inherent plasticity makes it as concrete as one would wish.

J. At the end of the chapter, Hegel departs from the usual triadic structure that shapes the other chapters of the *Logic* and adds a fourth section: *Das Urteil des Begriffs*. The title of the section tells us the gist of Hegel's argument. On the surface of the text it could seem that Hegel has argued that “the conceptual sphere” smoothly encompasses whatever is given to receptivity, reaching all the way out to the most particular content by enabling further and further distinctions and subdivisions. As the chapter on judgment progresses, Hegel takes the reader from the actual determination of the immediate empty notion, which has become a self-relating negativity (a judgment of existence) to the relationship between particular entities and their universal essences, insofar as essence is reflected in a plurality of particulars (a judgment of reflection). He then examines the determination of the Notion *qua* genus into the differences and identity of its species (a judgment of necessity).⁷⁸ It is this seemingly smooth, “one-sided” unity that Hegel sets out to rupture in the final and fourth section, where the Notion is judged.⁷⁹

This last part of the chapter concerns explicitly normative judgments, judgments of value, where we judge whether a determinate thing, state of affairs, or action accords with our concept of the self-same thing, state of affairs, or action.⁸⁰ We will be shown how a determinate concept is negatively related to itself insofar as its particular, conceptual content can prove to modify its universal form. Hegel's example is “a house,” but could just as easily have been “an action.” The claim “this is a good house” posits a particular house over against the universal form of a good house. And we can

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 630–57.

⁷⁹ Hegel uses the term “*Begriff*” to cover both the “Notion” as the power of thought and a particular concept. I have chosen to make a distinction: “Notion” stands for the power of thought, while “concept” simply stands for the class of what we usually understand as concepts of particular things (house, dog, boat, soup, etc.).

⁸⁰ “In this judgment the Notion is laid down as the basis, and since it is in relation to the object, it is an *ought-to-be* to which reality may or may not be adequate.” Hegel, *Logic*, 657.

determine that “some houses are good houses—some are not.” Thus the judgment: “a house built in this or that manner is a good house.” Here we find that it is the particular, contingent circumstances that determine how we should use the concept of a house.⁸¹ We can potentially encounter a singular house, which we would not immediately consider as being in accord with our norm for defining a good house, but which actually challenges and modifies our concept of a good house on the basis of a series of contingent (contextual) factors. In other words, within the framework of conceptual mediation, an apparent universal form encounters a particular instantiation, which generates new limits and markers for a correct use and understanding of the concept itself. Here the normative impetus—the “ought”—does not come from the supposedly universal form, but from the singular, “material” actuality of, say, a singular house, built and standing in space and time.

We find ourselves in situations where a concrete object of experience with its determinate material content becomes the measure for the correct grasp of the concept: the “ought” is on the side of the thing, so to speak. This shift cannot be predicted, but may happen completely contingently. Thus it depends on an apperceptive subject that considers the terrain and grasps the necessary conceptual reshaping in light of the particular situation. As it does, it simultaneously reforms itself *qua* its conceptual grasp of the world. This is how self-consciousness comes to appear as inherent to judging as such. More specifically, according to Hegel, we discover that the copula (“is”) in the judgment stands for the constitutive power of the apperceptive subject, which holds the two moments of the concept together in a judgment.⁸²

By simply observing the inner movement of the concept and abstracting from receptivity, we find ourselves immersed in a technical version of the dialectic of the in-itself and for-consciousness already considered above. Thus the chapter on judgment lays bare the “mechanics” of the inner plasticity of the Notion and confirms the *Phenomenology’s* rejection of a sharp distinction between a conceptual sphere of spontaneity and a realm of brute, extra-conceptual immediacy. Without leaving the realm of spontaneity, the space of reasons, we are able to account for the correction and modification of our concept on the basis of their actual, material content. Obtaining knowledge does not require a contribution from anything external to the conceptual powers of the apperceptive subject and its reasoning about what to believe or do.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 660ff.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 663.

The interesting thing to note is that judgments of value provide the most direct route to “objective” actuality.⁸³ It is precisely the type of judgment that we are most inclined to consider subjective that shows us how our judgments do not stop short of reality itself.

K. In the last sentence of the chapter on judgment, Hegel writes that once we come to see that the copula stands for the subject’s actual power to mediate between universal and particular, we are operating with three mutually mediating moments: “Through this *impregnation of the copula* the judgment has become the *sylogism*.”⁸⁴ What might initially have appeared as two qualitatively incommensurate spheres standing over and against each other, the realm of thought and understanding and the realm of particular, contingent, material experiences are now revealed to be united in the Notion, held together by the power of self-conscious thought.⁸⁵ Here we have Hegel’s definition of the power of reason.

Now Hegel is about to toss all three balls of the German Idealist nexus: self-consciousness, freedom, and reason, into the air. He does this by applying a decided twist to Kant’s account of reason in the critical philosophy by using Kantian formulations to subvert the spirit of Kant’s reflections. He agrees with Kant that the typical form that reason takes is the syllogism. He also agrees that reason strives towards the unconditioned, towards totality. He agrees that it is spontaneous, the paramount expression of freedom. But—and this is key—Hegel arrives at these conclusions through his dialectical investigation of the Notion and judgment (and the entire *Objective Logic* for that matter).

When the syllogism appears on stage it is as the paramount expression of the Notion’s power to sublimate the supposed distinction between form and content, appearance and essence, concept and thing. “Thus the syllogism is the completely posited Notion; it is *therefore* the rational.”⁸⁶ So while Hegel reaffirms Kant’s take on the syllogism as the typical form of the rational, he does so *because* it fully expresses the insight that the conceptual domain is unbounded. Reason, for Hegel, *is* the self-mediation of

⁸³ “This judgment, then, is *truly* objective; or it is the *truth of the judgment* in general.” Ibid., 662.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 663.

⁸⁵ “The Notion as such holds its moments sublated in *unity*; in the judgment this unity is internal or, what is the same thing, external; and the moments, although related, are posited as *self-subsistent extremes*. In the *sylogism* the Notion’s determinations are like the extremes of the judgment, and at the same time their determinate *unity* is posited.” Ibid., 664.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 664. Emphasis added.

the conceptual. In other words, according to Hegel, we understand what reason is by grasping the fact that actual knowledge of the world and the self-mediation and self-correction of the conceptual domain are one and the same reality, that the subject holds together form and content. As I wrote above, if I reason correctly about a state of affairs that is all I need to do to know that things are as I take them to be. For Hegel, reason is the power to know, and not an “empty ought” to which reality is supposed to conform. Therefore reason *is* inherently unconditioned.

In setting its own standards and norms and holding them up and judging them in the light of their ability to make sense of things, our reason is free. Not only does our reasoning give itself its own laws or norms, it also has the power to continuously revise and reshape them in light of its further discoveries. We are not bound or limited by a static (merely formal) definition of reason; rather, reason is the element in which we move as self-conscious knowers. It is what characterizes the life and action of self-conscious beings. When we reason we are concerned with everything that pertains to figuring out what to believe or do, with both form and content.⁸⁷ So, in more Hegelian terms, reason’s freedom is the ability to determine whether, in a given instant, the normative force resides with the particular form of the explanation we are applying or with the content we seek to comprehend, since—as we explicitly recognize in the form of the syllogism—reason is defined by the power of the mediating middle term that holds the two extremes together.⁸⁸

The capacity of reason is, in whichever situation we find ourselves, self-legislating in this broad sense—and this autonomy enables us to get it right when we seek knowledge. We are able to get it right because we can reconsider or revise what we initially thought to be the case. And the critical revision of our various commitments is an inherent aspect of what reasoning is—a definition of reason that does not include this common-sense aspect looks inherently artificial. We can explain why we did what we did and why we thought what we thought; we can provide grounds, and if they prove not to be satisfactory we can return to the issue and think things through once again.

⁸⁷Thus Hegel does not consider formal (mathematical) *calculation* a form of reasoning, and he describes “mathematical equality” as a “relation which converts the syllogizing process into a completely meaningless and tautological formulation of propositions.” *Ibid.*, 686.

⁸⁸“The essential feature of the syllogism is the unity of the extremes, the middle term which unites them, and the ground which supports them.” *Ibid.*, 665.

Instead of giving an abstract definition of reason and then trying to map it onto reality (or vice versa), Hegel shows the synonymy of reason with the power to know. If we have explained how we acquire actual knowledge, we have explained what reasoning is. An account of reason that does not explain how we acquire actual knowledge is simply useless. Thus reason is not a subjective imposition. Its objectivity consists in the power to determine how things actually stand, when we realize that nothing separates the way things are from the way we think about them. Of course we can make mistakes and find ourselves having to critically revise, but this merely proves that our ability to know and to reason is fallible—and we should take that in our stride.⁸⁹

Therefore, when we reach the end of the chapter on the syllogism, we are faced with a form of immediacy. Reason—like consciousness in the introduction to the *Phenomenology*—proves not to be an instrument that mediates something else and might therefore distort our access to it.⁹⁰ It is the way the world is manifest to self-conscious beings. It is not that, when we have read the chapter, we ought to have learned the right way to think, as though we were studying anatomy to learn how to walk.⁹¹ Rather, we have come to see that reason just *is* the way we figure out and explain what to think and do.⁹² Or, as Hegel puts it in the preface to the *Phenomenology*: “What has just been said can also be expressed by saying that Reason is *purposive activity*.”⁹³ It is unbounded, rational, self-conscious, and free agency.

⁸⁹ John McDowell, “Singular Thought and the Extent of Inner Space,” in *Meaning, Knowledge, and Reality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 232.

⁹⁰ “The syllogism is *mediation*, the complete Notion in its *positedness*. Its movement is the sublating of this mediation, in which nothing is in and for itself, but each term is only by means of an other. The result is therefore an *immediacy* which has issued from the *sublating of mediation*, a *being* which is no less identical with the mediation, and which is the Notion that has restored itself out of, and in, its otherness.” Hegel, *Logic*, 704.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 682.

⁹² In this chapter, I have not written explicitly about practical reason in Hegel. Hegel does not make a sharp distinction between practical and theoretical reasoning, because he views practical reason as the application of a form that explains the actions and intentions of self-conscious beings. While our actions certainly can be the result of a conscious reasoning about what to do, it is not always so. We often act directly, without deeper reflection. This does not make our actions unreasonable—we can show that they have a rational form and we can account for them *qua* giving grounds for acting. It simply means that, generally, our actions are unlikely to be the direct result of formal syllogizing. In this sense, I (by and large) take Hegel to be an Aristotelian with regards to practical reason—at least in the way G. E. M. Anscombe reads Aristotle in *Intention* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

⁹³ Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 12.

L. My story about German Idealism is drawing to a close. I conclude this chapter by sketching a very general outline of some consequences of German Idealism for doing theology, issues that been largely absent from the chapter thus far. This entails drawing conclusions that might go beyond what the German Idealists explicitly wrote, even if they are implicit in the arguments. I begin by briefly looking at Hegel's defence of the so-called "ontological argument." This leads me to outline some aspects of what "Spirit" entails in Hegel's philosophy. Then I draw my own (provisional) conclusions about the influence and significance of German Idealism for theology (broadly conceived).

I will not go into much detail at this point, since the remainder of this book on Barth's speculative theology is the actual working out of the influence and consequences of German Idealism on an important strand of protestant theology, i.e., how it shaped the work of (arguably) the greatest theologian since Thomas Aquinas—both positively and negatively. Nonetheless, reviewing a compressed résumé of where we have been before turning to Barth's theology is in order.

Before diving into the last big section of the *Logic, Objectivity*, Hegel, in his own résumé of where the *Logic* has taken us, makes a strong claim: "It is self-evident that this latter transition is identical in character with what formerly appeared in *metaphysics* as the *inference* from the *notion*, namely, the *notion of God*, to *his existence*, or as the so-called *ontological proof* of the *existence of God*."⁹⁴ Although "self-evident" is a big word, it is not that hard to see Hegel's intentions: on closer inspection the Notion—as the power of conceptual mediation—resists being conceived as a merely subjective reality operating at an epistemic distance from the world of objects towards which it is directed. The *Science of Logic* has made it clear that we cannot make sense of that one-sided picture of the conceptual domain, and that a full-blooded account of rationality requires us to affirm the objectivity of the Notion, i.e., requires us to affirm that conceptual mediation is open to, takes in and includes the way the world actually is. Only an abstract and one-sided concept stops short of "existence." Thus what takes place in the so-called ontological proof is simply a particular instantiation of a general principle.⁹⁵

⁹⁴Hegel, *Logic*, 705.

⁹⁵"Now though it might seem that the transition from the Notion into objectivity is not the same thing as the transition from the Notion of God to his existence, it should be borne in mind ... that the determinate *content*, God, makes no difference in the logical process, and the ontological proof is merely an application of this logical process to the said content." Hegel, *Logic*, 706.

It is important to note that Hegel is aware of Kant's influential rejection of the so-called ontological proof. Kant conceived existence as brute, material being that remains untouched by our particular (human) way of perceiving. It is raw matter from which form is subtracted, including space and time as our particular forms of intuition. Whether or not something is depends, in a full sense, on its material existence, which is simply given, and that is a separate issue from how we happen to conceive of things. Thus Kant can say that the concept of God does not entail the actual existence of God, just as the concept of a hundred dollars in my mind does not entail the existence of a hundred dollars in my pocket.

Hegel's reply is straightforward. The concrete material and contingent existence of individual objects and states of affairs is not a brute facticity separate from the unfolding of the Notion. It is not something exterior to the way our unbounded conceptual domain mediates and corrects itself. Rather, it can serve as a moment in the self-relating negativity that constitutes our intentional interaction with reality. As Hegel writes: "The Notion, even as formal, already immediately contains *being* in a *truer* and *richer* form, in that, as self-related negativity, it is individuality."⁹⁶ If we subtract this self-relating negativity from our understanding of the Notion, we are left with a picture of the conceptual space as a self-enclosed realm of one-sided and abstract representations—and then it becomes impossible to see how this realm of abstractions actually relates to the world towards which our concepts are directed.⁹⁷ We lose the plasticity of conceptual mediation that does not stop short of reality.

It is often thought that, without the brute notion of existence that drives Kant's rejection of the so-called ontological proof, all manner of curious and imaginary creatures come crawling out the woodwork to claim their existence alongside such respectable entities as tables, chairs, and planetary systems. This overlooks Hegel's immanent critique of the existence of abstract concepts: what it is for something to exist in the full sense of the word is for it to be subject to the dialectic of being both for consciousness and in itself, for it to exhibit its actual self-relating negativity. If we cannot see our way to make sense of a given concept in light of the speculative development wherein it gains actual determination, it falls by the wayside as an empty and abstract representation. Then it ceases to help us make sense of things, which is what our concepts are there to do.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 707.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

But as long as it helps us make sense of things within the ongoing dialectic of subject and substance, the attempt to chase it out by invoking some abstract (brute) criterion for determining what is really, really real is philosophically suspect.

This brings us to Hegel's concept of "Spirit," which is related to the issue just discussed. As mentioned above, I will not be comprehensive. For my purposes, it is sufficient to point out certain aspects that are necessary to lift Hegel's concept off the ground. To begin with we can capture a fundamental aspect of Hegel's philosophy with a famous line from Hilary Putnam's paper, "The Meaning of 'Meaning,'" and its subsequent development by John McDowell in the paper, "Putnam on Mind and Meaning". First I quote the line from Putnam, then McDowell's point. Putnam: "Cut the pie any way you like, 'meanings' just ain't in the *head!*"⁹⁸ McDowell: "Meanings are in the mind, but, as the argument establishes, they cannot be in the head; therefore, we ought to conclude the mind is not in the head."⁹⁹

That the mind is not in the head is a nice way to sum up a core premise for understanding Hegel's account of Spirit. To conceive mental life as a distinctly separate reality (perhaps located in a distinct part of the human body) throws us back into the puzzles about how operations internal to some particular organ can have a bearing on the world.¹⁰⁰ The mind, as McDowell would have it, is best conceived in a comprehensive manner as the life-world of a rational animal, including its habits, its environment, its individual and social norms and practices.¹⁰¹ For Hegel, reason as the

⁹⁸ Hilary Putnam, "The Meaning of 'Meaning,'" in *Mind, Language, and Reality*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 227.

⁹⁹ John McDowell, "Putnam on Mind and Meaning," in *Meaning, Knowledge, and Reality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 276.

¹⁰⁰ "Of course there is an organ, the brain, whose proper functioning is necessary for mental life. But that is not to say that the proper functioning of that organ is what mental life, in itself, is. And if we deny that, we need not be suggesting instead that mental life is, in itself, the functioning of some mysterious immaterial para-organ (an organ 'so to speak'). Mental life is an aspect of our lives, and the idea that it takes place in the mind can, and should, be detached from the idea that there is a part of us, whether material or (supposing this made sense) immaterial, in which it takes place. Where mental life takes place need not be pinpointed any more precisely than by saying that it takes place where our lives take place." *Ibid.*, 281.

¹⁰¹ "My aim is not to postulate mysterious powers of mind; rather, my aim is to restore us to a conception of thinking as the exercise of powers possessed, not mysteriously by some part of a thinking being, a part of whose internal arrangements are characterizable independently of how the thinking being is placed in its environment, but unambiguously by a

self-mediation of our conceptual grip on the world cannot be reduced to something that is limited to a particular point of view, but includes a full concept of self-consciousness in and for itself (as in *Lordship and Bondage*), the material environment, and various norms and practices. It is, as argued above, unbounded. As Hegel writes: “Reason is Spirit when its certainty of being all reality has been raised to truth, and it is conscious of itself as its own world, and of the world as itself.”¹⁰²

Certainly, for Hegel, Spirit has further implications than McDowell’s more modest description of the mind as the life of a rational animal. A particular (historical) shape of Spirit includes everything that helps us make sense of things, from material conditions and inter-subjective social relations to religious practices and cultural artifacts. And when I mentioned Hegel’s account of God above, I argued that Hegel is suspicious of throwing concepts that help us make sense of things on the philosophical scrapheap, and it is clear that the concept of God serves this purpose for him. His view is that the basic structure of the right account of knowledge is present in the religious representations (*Vorstellung*) of Christianity before they make their way into philosophy.¹⁰³ In other words, Christian religion anticipates the speculative identity of subject and substance (albeit in a more primitive form). Thus Hegel’s concept of Spirit owes something to theology. In the doctrine of the trinity, the representation of speculative knowledge appears to and is recognized by a form of life, which grasps it by means of the form of knowing represented. Roughly, the conceptual form of the system appears immediately as a moment within the system itself.¹⁰⁴ Thus, as the principle of the life and knowledge of the trinity in the human community, the deeper, theological connotations of Spirit

thinking being being itself, an animal that lives its life in cognitive and practical relations to the world.” *Ibid.*, 289.

¹⁰² Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 263.

¹⁰³ “God is attainable in pure speculative knowledge alone and is only in that knowledge itself, for He is Spirit; and this speculative knowledge is the knowledge of the revealed religion. Speculative knowledge knows God as Thought or pure Essence, and knows this Thought as simply Being and as Existence, and Existence as the negativity of itself, hence as Self, as the Self that is at the same time this individual, and also the universal, Self. It is precisely this that the revealed religion knows.” *Ibid.*, 461.

¹⁰⁴ “The joy of beholding itself in absolute Being enters self-consciousness and seizes the whole world; for it is Spirit, it is the simple movement of those pure moments, which expresses just this: that only when absolute Being is beheld as an *immediate* self-consciousness is it known as Spirit.” *Ibid.*, 461.

carry over into Hegel's philosophy, although its subsequent development carries it in a direction that proved hard for theologians to endorse.¹⁰⁵

The important point is that however one views Hegel's use of the concept of God, it is clear that it serves as a particular content in a form of knowing that largely stands whether or not it is mediated by this particular instantiation.¹⁰⁶ It has value insofar as it mediates a particular insight concerning the dialectic of substance and subject. In other words, it is not itself the absolute, but plays its part as a moment in a speculative progression that is directed towards the absolute. Remaining committed to the actual content of Christian doctrine is to be committed to a useful representation of the truth—but *not* the truth itself.¹⁰⁷ What Christianity is (or turns out to be) in truth is a question that is answered by the progress of Spirit as the historical unfolding of the life of reason.

It is self-conscious subjectivity that holds the key to the relevance and value of "God" in this formation. "God" simply ceases to be conceivable as a separate power over and against the power of the rational subject. The self-conscious subject determines whether the concept ultimately has enduring value for making sense of the world. The concept of God must prove its worth in front of the tribunal of self-consciousness as it is on its own path to absolute knowing. Not only does the concept of God not signal a limit to the power of subjectivity, human subjectivity itself limits the power that we can ascribe to the concept of God; it is at our mercy. Thus self-consciousness is the absolute measure of actuality—of the things that are that they are and of the things that are not that they are not. The limits that Kant had put in place in his critical philosophy left a sliver of a space open for a notion of radical transcendence. That opening disappears in Hegel's philosophy. And, in light of Hegel's speculative argument, we must admit that it disappears for good reasons.

¹⁰⁵ "For Hegel, as for Luther, it is Spirit that 'calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies,' Spirit alone that overcomes the absolute paradox of the two worlds of universal and particular, whether in their formal or their material aspect. While the Incarnation is the concrete, representational symbol of this overcoming, it is Spirit that makes it actual and Spirit alone that makes it intelligible in the spiritual community." Alan M. Olson, *Hegel and the Spirit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 127.

¹⁰⁶ Of course, this is an overstatement, since we know that form is not independent of content. Perhaps we should rather say that, even if Christianity as we know it had not appeared on stage, something very like it would have appeared to provide a representation of the inner dialectic of Spirit to be known by itself.

¹⁰⁷ Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 479.

* * *

I have told the story of German Idealism to set the stage for my account of Barth's early theology. At the very beginning of the chapter on Kant I invoked the early reviews of Barth's *Romans-Commentaries* and pointed out how they all narrowed in on subjectivity as a key to understanding what Barth was up to. I argued that telling the story of German Idealism would allow us to see clearly how and why the early reviewers would think that. I have since suggested that there is more to the story than that. The scope and detail of my reading of German Idealism could appear to be overkill, if the only purpose had been to understand a handful of theological reviewers. Now, as I am about to leave the Idealists, it is time to acknowledge that I have other, albeit related, reasons for engaging with these thinkers in such detail.

I have already suggested in the first chapter that being a speculative theologian is in part doing theology in light of the breakthroughs of the German Idealists; to think both with and against their fundamental ideas. Thus, in presenting Barth as a speculative theologian, I have had to show what some of those basic ideas amount to, how they were put to use and what their consequences are. That required treating them in some detail. Still, would that task require a treatment as comprehensive as the one I have given in these two chapters?

Perhaps, but I have an additional reason. The German Idealists present a challenge to theology: the normative power of the autonomous, self-conscious subject. This challenge flows from their solution to deep philosophical problems. Most of them do not set out to subvert theology—Hegel will even claim that he is saving theology from the watered-down religious tracts that contemporary theologians are producing.

Nonetheless, after German Idealism there appears to be no room left for a genuine theological concept of God; no room for an independent power that stands over and against the human creature and rules the world according to its own free and sovereign will. In its place stands the self-conscious subject. The challenge for the theologian is that this happens for very good reasons. The challenge is that one cannot turn back time or define the problem away by pursuing a pre-critical metaphysics.

This is what I have wanted to make clear: if theology can be done, it will be done by taking up this challenge in its entirety. My argument is that this is what Barth does. I argue as well that he succeeds—and this makes him a speculative theologian. He finds a way to hold on to the radical otherness

and freedom of God without shying away from the full force of the challenge. The greatness of his speculative theology is measured by what it overcomes. The impotence of the alternatives is measured by the extent to which they fail to take the challenge seriously. As Hegel writes: “The genuine refutation must penetrate the opponent’s stronghold and meet him on his own ground; no advance is gained by attacking him somewhere else and defeating him where he is not.”¹⁰⁸ Theology must be done in light of the nexus of reason, freedom, and self-consciousness. Here too, in the face of the power of the self-conscious subject, God must prove to be Lord.

Hic Rhodus, hic salta.

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¹⁰⁸ Hegel, *Logic*, 581.

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PART II

From Dialectical
to Speculative Theology

The Early Dialectical Theology of Barth and Thurneysen

Wissen wir jetzt, was die Freiheit Gottes, was seine Gnade ist!?
Karl Barth, Der Römerbrief, 7 Kapitel

Waterloo, the voyage of the *Beagle*, the revolutions of 1848, Søren Kierkegaard, cholera, Ludwig Feuerbach, the American Civil War, Karl Marx, Fyodor Dostoevsky, the Paris Commune of 1871, Friedrich Nietzsche, Georg Cantor, Gottlob Frege, the Dreyfus affair, and the Great War—the list could go on. Between Hegel’s *Science of Logic* and the advent of the dialectical theology of Eduard Thurneysen and Karl Barth stands a striking series of social, political, scientific, and intellectual discoveries, fractures, transformations, crises, and calamities. These events form a historical backdrop for the appearance of dialectical theology; they offer us a possible angle from which to approach this new intellectual movement.

This historical framework is, however, a perspective on dialectical theology that I will use very sparingly. As an honest bid at a correct account of how things stand with God, the world, and its self-conscious inhabitants, Karl Barth’s theology must stand on its own without reference to its historical context. Unquestionably, the Great War played a significant part in shaping the thinking of the early dialectical theologians (as they were well aware), but none of them would wish to have his thoughts understood as its historical product. If Barth’s speculative theology makes sense, it does so on its own—because we can use it in vastly different historical contexts

and intellectual situations. I am interested in the rationality of Barth's theology, in the force of its arguments, and its deep structure, and that forms the subject of this second part of the book.

Still, it might seem that my approach in this book has been largely diachronic. From the moment I left the early reviewers of Karl Barth's *Romans-Commentaries* at the beginning of Chap. 3, I have been telling a story that roughly follows the chronological order of the development of German Idealism from Kant to Hegel. Now, as I begin to map the development of Barth's theology, it could easily seem that I am sticking to a diachronic mode of presentation—even if I am obviously bracketing off about ninety years of turbulent history, from Hegel's death in 1831 to the publication of the second *Romans-Commentary* in 1922. I want to challenge this assumption before I focus on Barth's theology.

I will do this by lifting the curtain a little and giving the reader an idea of the general direction of Barth's early thinking in light of the theological challenges that grew out of German Idealism. I hope not only that this will provide a helpful sense of orientation as I fast-forward about a century, but also that it will serve as a smooth segue from the provisional conclusion reached at the end of the first part of the book to the early work of the dialectical theologians, Karl Barth and Eduard Thurneysen. So, while this chapter primarily examines two texts, Thurneysen's *Dostoevsky* from 1921 and Barth's *Romans II* from 1922, I will begin my study of their theology by analyzing a later text, namely Barth's 1946 book *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, which is based on a series of lectures given in the mid 1930s.

A. The first 150 pages of *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century* serve as a critical diagnosis of the overall challenge facing protestant theologians in the nineteenth century: the self-absolutizing of humanity. This problem becomes more and more explicit over the course of the seventeenth century and finally manifests itself in a series of distinctive ways in the works of Rousseau, Lessing, Kant, Herder, Novalis, and Hegel. Each of them expresses and conceptualizes this intellectual development in his own distinctive form, but it is clear that beneath the surface a series of related answers to related questions and assumptions determines their respective chains of reasoning. Each is given a full chapter, and Barth goes through key parts of their work in some detail. In fact, by far the largest part of *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century* is taken up with exploring the main intellectual and philosophical developments of the eighteenth century.

While each of these thinkers is given careful attention, it is clear that Barth's estimation of their work varies. For example, it is hard to miss that Barth thinks that Herder's ideas—influential as they undoubtedly are—in themselves amount to very little. Herder's criticism of Kant and Kant's emphasis on conceptual mediation and rationality as well as Herder's own appeal to immediacy and feeling are subjected to subtle ridicule.¹ This contrasts with Barth's explicit appreciation of Kant's work—and with his careful and sympathetic reading of Novalis, of whom he can write that "... Novalis is the only Romantic whose work goes on seeming relevant and new [*immer noch und immer wieder Aktualität zu besitzen scheint*]. He is the poet whom we cannot silence by any historical relativizing, any more than we can silence Kant—who was so different—in that way [*wie etwa der so ganz andere Kant*]."² Not only is Barth more sympathetic to some of these thinkers, he can even find aspects of their thinking that pre-empts parts of his own theological approach. I have two specific topics in mind: one from his treatment of Kant and one from his treatment of Novalis.

According to Barth, Kant leaves the theologian with three possibilities in light of his critical philosophy: (1) to accept Kant's philosophy and its definition of the role of religion in full as its premise; (2) to subject Kant's philosophy and its definition of the role of religion to an immanent critique to enrich its concept of reason by including feeling and presentiment and thus expanding the role of religion; or (3) to question "... not only the application of the Kantian conception of the problem, but the conception itself, and therefore the autocracy and its competence to judge human reason in relation to the religious problem."³ This last approach would not involve constructing a theology on the basis of Kantian philosophy. It would be a theology *qua* theology. And, Barth notes, we actually find this idea of a theology that operates beyond the scope of philosophy explicitly mentioned in Kant's work. "He [Kant] explicitly calls this other theology, which limits philosophical theology, 'biblical theology', and it is his wish

¹The most explicit example is Barth's dry characterization of Herder's overall approach in light of the poem, *Die Schöpfung*: "This makes it quite clear to us that the most significant concept—perhaps with this despiser of the syllogism we should rather say, the most significant word, or sound, even—of Herder's thought, can be nothing but humanity." Karl Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century* (London: SCM Press, 2001), 310. *Die Protestantische Theologie im 19. Jahrhundert* (Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag A.G. Zollikon, 1947), 288.

²Barth, *Protestantische Theologie*, 306.

³Barth, *Protestant Theology*, 292; *Protestantische Theologie*, 273.

that the affairs of this biblical theology should not ‘be allowed to mingle’ with those of philosophy, but rather to shape for itself, in its singularity, its own determinate and distinct concept.”⁴ In other words, by Kant’s own lights, no matter what conclusions, insights, and gains his philosophy might have realized, there is a domain proper to theology that remains unaffected by the scope of Kantian thought: biblical theology as the praxis of reading, reflecting, and proclaiming the content of the biblical texts within the Church. Certainly, Kant thinks that a “biblical theology” thus constrained will prove to be toothless; what is problematic is the belief that orthodox dogmatic propositions are vindicated by pure, unaided reason. Once that belief is thoroughly critiqued, Kant thinks that the biblical texts will automatically lose the claim to authority that they once enjoyed.

Barth is well aware of Kant’s dismissive attitude. His response is simply to point out that Kant’s approach to the authority of biblical theology amounts in fact to an attitude or assumption—not an actual argument. That is, it is not given that the texts are barred claiming an authority that derives from somewhere other than unaided human reason as Kant understands it. Indeed, it is not impossible that we might on further inspection find that the biblical texts themselves could call into question the legitimacy of the authority of the rational human subject—as Kant understands it.⁵ As Barth points out in his concluding remarks on Kant: “It is only necessary to take quite seriously what Kant said half in mockery, in order to hear something very significant, even though we reserve in every respect the right to object to his formulations. Or is it not the case that the philosopher of pure reason has said something very significant to the theologian in telling him in all succinctness that ‘*The biblical theologian proves that there is a God by means of the fact that he has spoken in the Bible?*’”⁶

Then there is Novalis, whose works Barth places beyond the scope of historical relativizing—alongside the work of Kant. In a fragment from

⁴ Barth, *Protestant Theology*, 294; *Protestantische Theologie*, 275.

⁵ It is, if nothing else, interesting to note that Barth does not mention the approach to theology after Kant that Bruce McCormack has argued was Barth’s own. This would certainly be the place for Barth to bring it up. Rather than arguing that God, being a thing-in-itself, is revealed as an object of sense perception within the bounds of the transcendental aesthetic in the human being, Jesus, accompanied by a subjective imputation of knowledge directly in the believer by means of the Holy Spirit, Barth seems to argue that a particular praxis of reading the biblical scriptures provides a vantage point from which to critically challenge Kant’s assumptions.

⁶ Barth, *Protestant Theology*, 298; *Protestantische Theologie*, 278 (Barth’s emphasis).

Novalis's *General Draft*, his unfinished encyclopedia, Barth finds a particular formulation, which suggests that Novalis anticipated something that would come to play a significant part in Barth's own theology.⁷ Barth writes: "Somewhere among Novalis's mathematical fragments there is enclosed in brackets the little sentence, fraught with meaning: 'God is sometimes $1 \times \infty$, sometimes $1/\infty$, sometimes 0.' In the 'sometimes $1 \times \infty$, sometimes $1/\infty$ ' is contained the whole ideology of pure Romanticism, while the added 'sometimes 0' contains its whole problem."⁸ Although the meaning of the sentence is ambiguous, Barth argues that it could be read theologically as a deconstruction of the Romantic project and its understanding of the divine as the creative, poetic energy of life in particular. The "0" signals a "*metabasis eis allo genos*," a transition within the sentence from one conception to a radically different one. According to Barth, the "1" stands either for the human subject itself or for the unfolding of the creative (poetic) life in which the subject affirms itself in relation to infinity (∞). In contrast, the "0" stands for the negation of the "1"—the fundamental impossibility of affirming the subject and its creative power.

Barth then links the mathematical–theological fragment to one of the central motifs of Novalis's work: "There was in fact a very universally human factor which played a very special part in the life of Novalis, and one which stands in close relationship to this 'sometimes 0': namely, *Death*."⁹ The question is whether Novalis has understood death as a limit to the creative power of human life, which can point to the affirmation of *a radically different reality* beyond life and the power of the subject. In other words, has Novalis grasped the theological insight that, in our death, God stands revealed as a power *over and beyond* the life of the human ego?

Certainly, the term "Christ" features prominently in Novalis's poetry as a shorthand for the possibility of affirming a life of love beyond the negativity of death—but, asks Barth, does "Christ" stand for the intervention of a radically different order beyond the limits of a human life, or for a poetic possibility that emerges from within the creative life of the human subject? Theologically, everything depends on which of two senses of "Christ" is affirmed.¹⁰ In light of Novalis's poems and fragments, we cannot definitively

⁷ Novalis, *Philosophical Writings* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997), 135.

⁸ Barth, *Protestant Theology*, 349; *Protestantische Theologie*, 325.

⁹ Barth, *Protestant Theology*, 352; *Protestantische Theologie*, 326.

¹⁰ "Ist der Tod nun nicht doch in ein Harmonienspiel aufgelöst? Und lässt er sich denn so auflösen? ... Kann man so mit ihm [der Tod] fertig werden, indem man ihm im Handkehrum den Namen Christus gibt?" *Protestantische Theologie*, 339.

decide which it is. Nonetheless, as Barth concludes, "... the emphasis with which here just *things Christian* become a symbol, and the proximity in which things Christian find themselves to the critical concept of *death*, would still remain striking and singular, even if our final judgment must be that in the last resort the riddle of death has been juggled away once more and that Christianity has yet again been interpreted in humanistic terms."¹¹ So, at worst, Novalis's work bears witness to a missed opportunity—at best, it preempts an understanding of the close relationship between a radical negativity encountered in the death of the human subject and "Christ" as the name of an intervention or revelation of a wholly different order.

The praxis of reading the Biblical scriptures and death as an unbridgeable border: according to Barth these two topics signify an opening for theology in the face of the self-absolutizing of humanity that reached a high point in the work of the German Idealists and Romantics. Between the biblical text and the actual consciousness of one's own mortality, the dialectical theologian may be able to locate a form of thought that is shaped by an order that ranges beyond the scope of the modern self-conscious subject. And a form of thought about the limits of self-consciousness that allows itself to be thus taught might once again capture what it means to say that "God is God." That, in a nutshell, is the wager that Barth and Thurneysen make in rethinking the task of theology as modern humanity's self-image rapidly begins to crumble in the carnage of the First World War.

B. The purpose of this bridge between the first and second parts of this book is to point out the theological openings that Barth discovers in the work of the German Idealists and the Romantics. With this in mind, I will now provide a general outline of how I want to engage with Barth's early work.

In the preface to the first volume of the *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, written in August 1932, Barth explicitly distances himself from the notion that he is part of a "school" called "dialectical theology." He certainly appreciates that there are theologians, pastors, and laypeople who share his overall approach to the contemporaneous theological situation, but he does not think that it can be viewed as a clearly defined movement, school, or direction. Nevertheless, there is one collaboration that is not in doubt: "I may take it as well known that there exists between Eduard Thurneysen and myself a theological affinity which is of long standing and has always

¹¹ Barth, *Protestant Theology*, 368; *Protestantische Theologie*, 341.

shown itself to be self-evident.”¹² When, in spite of Barth’s admonition, I write about “dialectical theology,” I mean it to denote the theological approach that Barth and Thurneysen shared. I think that their shared approach warrants the label “dialectical theology” because they develop a particular theological use of negativity in relation to a particular account of self-consciousness. It is this “dialectical theology” that is the subject of the rest of this chapter.

There are several readings of Barth’s early dialectical theology as it is expressed in his second Romans-Commentary.¹³ I want to use Eduard Thurneysen’s reading of Dostoevsky as the starting point for my reading of Barth’s 1922 book on Romans. The “long standing and self-evident theological affinity” between their works provides a lens through which it becomes possible to narrow in on the decisive questions and answers with which Barth engages in his exegesis of Paul’s letter. It is important to bear in mind that Thurneysen’s *Dostoevsky* is explicitly a reading of literary texts—and that it is obviously not a doctrinal treatise in any straightforward sense of the term. As should already be clear from what I have written about Barth’s theological approach in Chap. 1, I think the same goes for Barth’s second Romans-Commentary. It is first and foremost a reading of a text—and not meant to be a work that posits particular theological doctrines. By emphasizing the practical and textual aspect of theology, Barth and Thurneysen want their readers to begin to see things and events in a particular light—and in part they argue that this way of viewing things proves to be more critical, less prone to illusion, and thus more correct, than the various surrounding worldviews that struggle to shape their period.

It is not convincing, of course, to be told that if only one looks at the world a certain way, then one will come to agree with those who propagate that particular worldview. And that is not Barth’s and Thurneysen’s line. They do not advocate any particular worldview. Quite the opposite:

¹²Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975), preface. *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1935), x.

¹³For a series of alternative takes on *Romans II* see Walter Lowe, “Barth as a Critic of Dualism: Re-reading the *Römerbrief*,” *Scottish Journal of Theology*, vol. 41, 377–95; Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 207–90; Bent Flemming Nielsen, *Die Rationalität der Offenbarungstheologie* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1988), 13–39; and T. F. Torrance, *Karl Barth: An Introduction to his Early Theology, 1910–1931* (London: SCM Press LTD, 1962).

they want to direct attention to a particular praxis: the praxis of reflective reading. Seen from this angle they are part of a broader movement in the history of ideas. As Dewey, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein argued in their distinctive ways, there is a significant difference between how things appear from a practically engaged “position” and a detached, contemplative “position.” Barth and Thurneysen—along with the three thinkers just mentioned—are pioneer thinkers of the praxis-oriented approach, and they (more or less explicitly) argue that we can see our way out of particular conceptual deadlocks by insisting on the priority of praxis over theory.¹⁴

In light of what Barth wrote about Kant and Novalis in *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, we have two distinct points of entry into the works of the early dialectical theologians: the praxis of reading and reflecting on the biblical texts, and the poetic, “aesthetic” expression of death as the negation of the subject and signpost of a wholly new order. Roughly, Barth’s *Romans-Commentary* is the most straightforward example of the former and Thurneysen’s *Dostoevsky* is the most straightforward example of the latter. I turn now to the latter.

EDUARD THURNEYSEN’S DOSTOEVSKY

A. The first point Thurneysen makes about Dostoevsky’s writings concerns a difference in the way things and events present themselves to our gaze. “Whoever comes to Dostoevsky from the regions of secure humanity [*den Gestaden gisicherter Menschlichkeit*], of the pre-war period for

¹⁴As Bent Flemming Nielsen has pointed out in “Theology as Liturgy? The Practical Dimension of Barth’s Thinking” (in *Dogmatics after Barth: Facing Challenges in Church, Society and Academy*, eds. Günter Thomas, Rinse H. Reeling Brouwer, and Bruce McCormack, 67–80 (Leipzig: Create Space Independent Publishing Platform, 2012)), we find this priority exemplified in the rightly famous quote from Barth’s 1922 paper, “The Word of God as the Task of Theology”: “I would characterize our situation with the following three sentences: *as theologians we ought to speak of God. We are, however, human and as such cannot speak of God. We should recognize both*, our ‘ought’ and our ‘cannot,’ *and thus give God the glory*. That is our predicament. Everything else is child’s play.” Karl Barth, “Das Wort Gottes als Aufgabe der Theologie,” in *Karl Barth Gesamtausgabe—Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1922–1925 (GA III.19)* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1990), 151 (Barth’s emphasis). The conceptual contradiction is not dissolved, but is transposed from the theoretical to the practical sphere. We find that the seeming deadlock, in fact, signals a turn to a particular, theological praxis—to give God the glory—and is thus in a certain way practically mediated, while it retains the appearance of a contradiction at the theoretical level.

instance, must feel like one who has been looking at such domesticated animals [*von der Anschauung der Haustiere*] as the dog and the cat, the chicken or the horse, and then suddenly sees the Wild before him, and without warning finds himself face to face with the yet untamed animal world¹⁵ At first glance, Dostoevsky's writings are characterized by a subtraction. In Thurneysen's analogy, when we turn our eyes from domesticated to wild animals, what disappears is a level of familiarity, predictability, and presupposed coherence. Likewise, confronted with the way Dostoevsky's writings present humanity, our natural and largely unspoken assumptions about human life that provide the coordinates by which we navigate our day-to-day existence cease to be self-evident and become open to radical questioning. It becomes possible to ask the question "What is 'humankind?'" in a fundamentally different way.

That the question is asked without already having a self-evident and reliable answer at hand to fall back on is what makes Dostoevsky's writings the "... great critical dividing point which all significant thought systems of the close of the nineteenth century must encounter, and which determines their failure or success."¹⁶ They are characterized by their complete *lack* of presuppositions.¹⁷ As we saw with the German Idealists, the human subject is the author of the value judgments that provide the possible coordinates that make it possible for both a subjective and an objective reality to emerge. "But because all things on earth, as soon as one questions them as to where they come from and where they are going, point back like beams of light to man as the point from which they receive their value or lack of value, their light or shadow, man becomes the great riddle on which are fixed the deeply penetrating eyes of this questioner who has no presuppositions."¹⁸ Thurneysen argues that if one pushes the question "What is humanity?" as far as it can go, then the various positions from which one would usually provide an answer are already themselves in question. Thus Dostoevsky's writings present a series of pictures or thought experiments concerning what human life and interaction look like when subjected to such radical questioning.

¹⁵ Eduard Thurneysen, *Dostoevsky* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2010), 7; *Dostojewski* (Zürich: Gotthelt Verlag, 1948), 5.

¹⁶ Thurneysen, *Dostoevsky*, 9; *Dostojewski*, 7.

¹⁷ As Thurneysen writes: "His secret is really nothing but that question, his question about man." Thurneysen, *Dostoevsky*, 11; *Dostojewski*, 8.

¹⁸ Thurneysen, *Dostoevsky*, 12; *Dostojewski*, 9.

This is important: it is not that we end up with nothing once we embark on this form of questioning. It is, rather, that the questioning itself becomes a productive occasion for active, searching thought.¹⁹ “Dostoevsky does not have any final answer or solution to give us. His solution is found in the great dissolution; his answer is a question, the burning question of the being of man. But anyone who takes up this question will experience that even this question is full of answers.”²⁰ So there is a form of affirmation in Dostoevsky’s writings which is a product of his encounter with this negativity. And understanding this relationship between negativity and affirmation will provide us with a way of approaching the central concerns of Barth’s *Romans-Commentary*.

B. Dostoevsky’s form of writing, in which a series of scenarios that radically question the implicit self-image of the modern human subject play themselves out, was meant to make the reader confront a particular limit or border. According to Thurneysen’s reading of Dostoevsky, no human subject can answer the question that asks what the human subject is. Thurneysen’s first example is the character Raskolnikoff, whose project of murder is actually intended to be a clarification of concepts: what is it to be a great human being? What is life? What is morality? The murder is supposed to answer these questions. Thurneysen writes: “The boundaries of humanity are to be displaced. Here it is a matter of purity of the concepts: God, man, and life! And the solution? ... When he [Raskolnikoff] had pushed his dialectic to the uttermost point, there where the boundaries between heaven and earth, between God and man disappear, where man grasps for the life of God, it breaks, not in life, but in death. The deed [*Tat*] which this Promethean logic produces is the non-deed [*Un-tat*], murder. But it is exactly here that comprehension is found. It now becomes infinitely clear that man is *not* God.”²¹ Death, the actual result of his aspirations, stands as the inevitable end of all Raskolnikoff’s creative, theoretical schemes. The interesting point is that, precisely in the utter failure of his theory, conceptual clarity does emerge—behind his back, so to speak. By being confronted with the collapse of all his theoretical and existential ambitions, Raskolnikoff is confronted with his own determinate limits—and with an idea of something standing beyond that limit.

¹⁹ Thurneysen, *Dostoevsky*, 12; *Dostojewski*, 9.

²⁰ Thurneysen, *Dostoevsky*, 14; *Dostojewski*, 11.

²¹ Thurneysen, *Dostoevsky*, 19; *Dostojewski*, 14.

In one sense, the word “God” is here emptied of its common religious content, and stands simply for a power that operates beyond the boundaries that define the human subject.²² The conceptual form of this negativity is expressed in the tautology “God is *God*.”²³ I want to return to the genesis of the tautology later in the chapter, since much hinges on how it emerges as a particular shorthand in Barth’s and Thurneysen’s theology. For now we should recognize that it stands for a certain limit to our inquiries, and in recognizing the finality of this negativity there may emerge a thought of an “*unmögliche Möglichkeit*,” the “impossible possibility” of an agency of a different order that operates beyond the limited realm of human intentions and accomplishments. An affirmation of this power or agency would be unconditional, because the idea of it emerges only as an actuality that radically transcends the determinate conditions and boundaries that limit the world of which we are a part (God as *God*).

According to Thurneysen, the genius of Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* is precisely that it explicitly stops short of turning into banal vitalism. It does not invoke some version of immediate life or experience as a true reality beyond theory and thought. Rather, it is a critical tract that is careful not to overstep the bounds of the negativity beyond which it cannot think. It concerns *thinking*: how to “... distinguish a false thought from the true.”²⁴ Seen from this angle, the main thrust of Dostoevsky’s project is to provide a radical critique of ideology (secular and religious) in the form of a literary, poetic praxis.

Turning to *The Brothers Karamazov*, Thurneysen argues that there the focus is not on the theoretical or conceptual form of human self-absolutizing. Rather, it is an ideological critique of the worship of the immediacy of life; a critique of an absolutizing of the sensual or erotic, personified by the woman, Grushenka. It turns the critical gaze developed in *Crime and Punishment* on to the ideology of vitalism and aesthetic eroticism.

²² “Only now does he understand himself. Only now does he understand God. And only now does he understand himself in God and from God precisely in his limitedness [*Begrenztheit*] and humanity. He no longer strives to overcome it, for he knows that from *man*’s side there is no bridge that leads across; there is none for the sake of God’s honour and man’s purity. But—perhaps from *God*’s side—?! ...But this final possibility of man is no longer a possibility of *man*.” Thurneysen, *Dostoevsky*, 19ff; *Dostojewski*, 14ff.

²³ Thurneysen, *Dostoevsky*, 42; *Dostojewski*, 31.

²⁴ Thurneysen, *Dostoevsky*, 21; *Dostojewski*, 15.

In *The Idiot*, the main character, Prince Myshkin, is the personification of the recognition that all human claims to positive knowledge of—or access to—things transcendent are under radical negation. Myshkin draws his understanding of human life from his epileptic fits, which resemble the moment just prior to death. “The essential element is the nearness of the absolute moment of death which it brings with it.”²⁵ Thurneysen ties Myshkin’s perspective on the world in light of his fits to Dostoevsky’s near encounter with death, when as a young man he was almost executed on the Semenowsky Square in Petersburg. “He [Dostoevsky] learned from death how to understand life.”²⁶ This “*Todesweisheit*,” as Thurneysen calls it (I will return to the source of that phrase later as well), is a form of thought and action that proceeds from the insight that nothing immanent to the life and experience of the human subject can provide more than a fragmented and momentary sense of theoretical or practical orientation. All attempts to circumvent the strict limit to our thinking that mortality imposes stand exposed as fictions that result in death or some other form of moral, cultural, or spiritual collapse.

Nonetheless, Dostoevsky’s thinking does not result in nihilism or relativism, but instead points to an affirmation of a unity that is radically transcendent and thus irreducible to any given insight or perception that is immanent to our reality. As Thurneysen writes: “What kind of unknown position is that which can be described only as the comprehensive opposition [*Gegensatz*] to all known positions? What kind of meaning [*Sinn*] is that which appears only as the non-meaning [*Nicht-Sinn*] of all else that is called meaning?”²⁷

We have here a form of thinking through which one strives to perceive things and events in light of the affirmation of the radical transcendence of God, and this entails thinking in light of an unassimilable negativity—thinking and perceiving in light of a unity that is impossible to grasp or integrate on this side of death. As Thurneysen writes of Myshkin: “He never disturbs the boundaries of the last things, and never shortens the eternal distances. But he guards them. He is always seeking with all the power of his soul that ultimate point where everything has its end and its beginning in God, that ultimate point which is comparable only with death and birth. It is from that point he thinks and speaks, or at least out

²⁵ Thurneysen, *Dostoevsky*, 28; *Dostojewski*, 21.

²⁶ Thurneysen, *Dostoevsky*, 28; *Dostojewski*, 22.

²⁷ Thurneysen, *Dostoevsky*, 31; *Dostojewski*, 24.

of the striving to attain that point.”²⁸ He could equally well have written this of Dostoevsky himself. What may lend meaning or unity to the fragmented and death-bound life of the human subject is the “impossible possibility” of a “resurrection” or “the forgiveness of sins”: that is, the intellectual and practical openness to the intervention of an agency of an order that operates beyond the radical finitude that death makes explicit. And as Thurneysen writes: “Exactly at this point the essential connection of Dostoevsky’s knowledge with the ultimate knowledge of the Bible is unmistakable.”²⁹ The terms “resurrection” and “forgiveness of sins” are explicitly biblical concepts that take on the role of mediating the sense (*Sinn*) of this radical negativity.

C. This might seem to be a good point at which to turn to Barth. Nonetheless, I want to stay with Thurneysen and Dostoevsky for another moment and make the connection between dialectical theology and an “aesthetic perspective” more explicit. Thurneysen himself draws the connection, when he invokes an affinity between El Greco’s figures, the paintings of the expressionists, and Dostoevsky’s characters.³⁰ The figures in the paintings share with the writer’s characters the appearance of being stretched, or pulled, towards some point that lies outside the frame of the painting or picture.

In a painting or drawing, the relationship between all the lines and a single point that lies outside the picture is called “perspective.” Thurneysen writes: “Not some fantastic addition or grotesque exaggeration, but rather just such a strict and exact relationship of all lines to a vanishing point in the beyond is what we mean by that course toward the beyond and toward infinity which we have recognized as characteristic of Dostoevsky’s men and women.”³¹ Thurneysen’s point is that what allows the characters embodying this striving to be correctly described as “realistic” is that all forms of direct access to the unity, meaning, or ultimate ground of their existence is plainly subtracted from the picture itself. Things and events are allowed to appear as they are, because the ideological distortions (“fantastic additions or grotesque exaggerations”) have been critically negated, subtracted from the frame—and *nothing* is put in their place.

²⁸ Thurneysen, *Dostoevsky*, 33; *Dostojewski*, 25.

²⁹ Thurneysen, *Dostoevsky* 35; *Dostojewski*, 27.

³⁰ “Most probably these painters also have seen something of that deep tendency of life towards the beyond.” Thurneysen, *Dostoevsky*, 40. *Dostojewski*, 30.

³¹ Thurneysen, *Dostoevsky*, 41; *Dostojewski*, 30.

Yet the figures are striving for some unity beyond the frame that defines their reality—although this unity is out of their hands. Thurneysen’s Dostoevsky does not invoke a “mystic” or apophatic “nothingness” (for instance, “a dark night of the soul”), which appears as an option from within the picture. The focus is on the reality within the picture or painting itself. The negation is precisely a negation that confines the thinking and acting of the human subject to *this* life and *this* world—but without the ideological supplement that positive notions or assertions concerning states of affairs beyond the radical negativity of death provide. “[I]t has nothing in common with any of those moments of temporal elevation or enlightenment of the man who would like to undertake on his own to get rid of the eschatological tension of his life by making himself a god, and preparing for himself an Olympian festival.”³² Again, it negates the notion of an access to transcendent truth and unity and leaves nothing in its place. But, simultaneously, it manages to present the entire picture as defined by what it per necessity leaves out—and thus takes the spiritual striving of its figures deeply seriously.

To present this picture of reality—without falling into the temptation to succumb on the one hand to nihilism or relativism or on the other hand to vitalism, mysticism or some other appeal to immediacy of experience—requires a critical, dialectical balancing act. It requires a particular perspective on things and events. It is characterized by a form of aesthetic restraint: “To want more would be to want less.”³³ In this sense, we must recognize Dostoevsky’s aesthetic mark in what he does *not* do: he portrays his characters as inherently spiritually troubled beings, confronted on all sides with death, and cultural and moral collapse, but he never oversteps the limit and invokes any acquaintance with, or access to, a positive transcendental unity that could release the tension expressed. Thus, as surely as his characters long for transcendence, they find their redemption in recognizing how that as an option lies completely out of their hands. Only in fully recognizing the negation under which they stand do they find their redemption. Dostoevsky’s writings, his characters, his scenes, his thought experiments, remain *signposts*—and that is their claim to greatness. And as signposts we may understand them only as expressions of a particular praxis.

³²Thurneysen, *Dostoevsky*, 45; *Dostojewski*, 33.

³³Thurneysen, *Dostoevsky*, 45; *Dostojewski*, 33.

D. Now Dostoevsky's writings are not in any direct way reflections on biblical scripture. They are not concerned with constructing Christian doctrine or with understanding how knowledge of God, scripture, and Church doctrine are internally related. Rather, they explore the form in which everyday thought and action presents itself, when seen in light of the Christian revelation; they examine what is entailed in the concept of faith; they provide poetic accounts of how human self-conscious life is lived in relation to the acknowledgment that ... God is *God*. As Thurneysen writes: "God is *God*; that is the one, central recognition of truth [*Erkenntnis*] for Dostoevsky. His only concern is not to permit this God to become a man-god, no matter in what heights his throne may be, nor a piece of the reality of the human soul or of the world, no matter how idealistic."³⁴ Still, Thurneysen never claims that Dostoevsky is doing theology. Although he does not use it, the most fitting term to describe Dostoevsky's work might be "Christian thinking and writing." There is no sharp line to be drawn between this form of thinking and theology, but I would argue that the closer a writer comes to explicitly expounding the meaning of scriptural passages or proposing explicit formulas for how we can recognize something as essential to Christian faith, the closer he or she is to doing theology.

I stress this distinction because I want to suggest that theology is first and foremost a form of praxis, and this praxis can be distinguished from what someone like Dostoevsky is doing. Nevertheless, it would not be a category mistake to directly use arguments or concepts developed by an explicitly Christian writer in a theological argument, nor would it be a category mistake to directly apply theological concepts or arguments when explicating the thoughts of a Christian writer. In fact, moving from the one to the other requires no explanation or justification (unlike, say, moving from theology to medicine or from "Christian thought" to civil engineering).³⁵ Thus Barth is certainly justified when in August 1921 he writes in a letter to Thurneysen: "I am very, very pleased that besides my clumsy truck [*Der Römerbrief*] this nimble, yet extremely powerful,

³⁴ Thurneysen, *Dostoevsky*, 42; *Dostojewski*, 31.

³⁵ Certainly, one could also apply theological concepts and arguments to writers who do not self-identify as Christian writers/thinkers, such as Herman Melville and James Joyce. Increasingly, however, it becomes a question of producing an argument justifying the application of the category as one moves further and further away from explicitly Christian themes. This is not to say that a theological reading of *Moby Dick* might not be the most interesting or enlightening reading.

motorcycle [*Dostojewski*] is racing at full speed.” Two distinct vehicles with their particular qualities and uses are going full speed with the same end in sight—and, stretching the metaphor a bit further, it is now time for us to jump from the motorcycle onto the truck. Or, striking the metaphor, it is finally time explicitly to turn to theology.

KARL BARTH’S RÖMERBRIEF(S)

A. I want to approach the *Römerbrief* of 1922 by reaching all the way back to the very beginning of my chapter on Kant. I began that chapter with a short section on the reception of Barth’s two Romans-Commentaries (henceforth *Romans I* and *Romans II*). Almost all of the important reviewers whom I mentioned seized on some version of the self-conscious subject to explain to themselves and their readers the essential arguments of Barth’s two commentaries. In one way they were certainly right, but in another way they could not have been more wrong. A good way to approach Barth’s early dialectical theology is to explain how this could be the case.

When he explicitly engages the critics of *Romans I* in the preface to *Romans II*, Barth writes: “So what do I mean, when I call the *inner dialectic of the matter* and its recognition in the actual wording of the text the definitive factor for understanding and explanation?” In light of what I have already said about the early dialectical theologians, I can begin to piece a possible answer together: on the one hand, there is a particular theological discipline, biblical theology, which may prove to give expression to a form of authority that is not grounded in human self-conscious subjectivity. On the other hand, death can appear as an absolute negativity beyond which the human subject cannot go, as in the writings of Novalis and Dostoevsky. Genuine understanding of this form of negativity can give rise to a form of thought and practice that recognizes that the role of the human subject as the final arbiter of truth is undermined. It introduces a particular “aesthetic” view on things and events, where actual unity is understood to depend on the radically transcendent agency of a power acting from beyond the unbridgeable boundary that death represents. An insight along these lines forms the essential connection between Dostoevsky’s writings and the Bible.

This suggests that the essential challenge to theology is what Barth described as the self-absolutizing of the self-conscious subject in *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*. The biblical texts may not only prove

to provide a form of authority that does not rely on the human subject; they may outline a form of critical thinking that challenges or even negates the power of this subject. A sketch of what this form of thinking might look like could be found implicit in the writings of Dostoevsky. If we hold these various lines of thoughts together we can begin to see how it can be correct that self-consciousness plays an important role in Barth's *Romans II*, but also that Barth's aim is to outline a form of thinking that negates its claim to absolute authority in matters of theology. One form of thought and subjectivity is undermined, something else is put in its place, and the biblical text mediates this "transition." Bent Flemming Nielsen puts it well: "... A particular material [*sachliches*] problem must be grasped by means of a particular written text—Paul's letter to the Romans."³⁶

B. Because *Romans II* is a biblical commentary, it is a work of theology. Barth calls it "... a part of a theologian's conversation with theologians."³⁷ Nonetheless it is not a part of the theological conversation, because Barth approaches the text with "theological presuppositions" or "as a theologian." It is the actual engagement with the biblical text and its questions and answers that generates "theology"—whatever that may eventually turn out to be.

This understanding of "theology" shapes Barth's argument(s) with his early reviewers in the preface to *Romans II*. Although it is a serious point, there is a measure of sarcasm involved when Barth writes: "If I provisionally presuppose that, in *Romans*, Paul actually spoke about Jesus Christ and not about something else, then that hypothesis [*Annahme*] is, first of all, just as good or bad as any of the provisional hypotheses made by the historians. The [actual] interpretation alone can determine if and to what extent I will succeed in upholding my hypothesis.... If one were freely to ask me, what ground I have for approaching *Romans* with this hypothesis, then I would in turn ask whether any serious person (one who has not *already ceased* to take it seriously) could approach the Text with any other hypothesis than that—God is God?"³⁸ This is an important passage and there are several aspects to consider.

I note first the suggestion that the correctness of all prior assumptions or presuppositions are measured by the actual engagement with the text. There is a weak and a strong sense in which one can argue this point.

³⁶Nielsen, *Die Rationalität*, 13.

³⁷Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2011), xiv.

³⁸*Ibid.*, xxi (Barth's emphasis).

In the weak sense, when we engage with a text we find that there is a limit to what we can read into it without threatening the credibility of our reading. If someone suggests that Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* is a rigorous defense of Humean skepticism, it is not very hard to demonstrate that this is a misreading. The text plainly tells against it.³⁹

A strong version of the argument would claim that the text itself (*its* wording, *its* arguments) potentially gives expression to a critique of the reader's various prior assumptions. It is the concrete text of *Critique of Pure Reason* that brings about an actual critique of prior rationalist and empiricist philosophy and their various metaphysical commitments. In other words, in the strong sense, it is the case with some texts that, if you understand what you are reading, your initial approach will have been subjected to critique and the actual argument of the text would have significantly altered your view of things. And if we then say that "Kant critiques our immediate philosophical presuppositions," we are speaking as just figuratively as when we say that "the text critiques our immediate philosophical presuppositions." As I will show when we consider the concrete commentary on Paul's letter, Barth intends his claim to be taken in the strong sense.

This understanding of the critical force of the text is implied by the last claim in the paragraph: unless the reader has already ceased to take Paul's text seriously, he or she is confronted with the thought that—*God is God*. I write "claim," but there is an obvious problem: while "God is God" has the syntax of a proposition, semantically it is a tautology.⁴⁰

We have already encountered the same form of words in Thurneysen's *Dostoevsky*. Earlier I wrote that I wanted to return to the issue. Thurneysen used the tautology as a sort of shorthand for the recognition that there is a form of negativity that establishes a limit to the normative domain of the human subject. The syntactic form serves to underscore the impossibility of (a) equating "God" with anything other than God, and (b) circumventing the negativity and positing some reality above or beyond "God." In this sense, the tautology has a particular use within a larger argument. And it is this particular use within the argument as a whole that

³⁹ One would only have to point to the references to Hume, for example, on pages B 5, B 19, and B 127 of the second edition of *Critique of Pure Reason* to show that Kant is critical of Hume's position.

⁴⁰ For an insightful reading of the role of tautology in Barth's theology, see, *Die Rationalität*, 33–9.

allows us to speak of an “insight,” or a “recognition,” or a “claim,” rather than a semantically irrelevant statement. In the preface, Barth uses the tautology in much the same way.

The question is where this insight or recognition comes from. How does it come to appear to the reader? Barth seems to suggest that it is derived from the biblical text. If so, it is *constructed* on the basis of the text, since there is no such explicit formula in Paul’s letter to the Romans. I want to examine how exactly Barth comes to make this “discovery” by looking at the earlier text “The New World in the Bible” from 1917, which introduces several significant insights that will eventually shape the argument of *Romans II*.

C. “The New World in the Bible” is the written version of a talk that Barth gave as part of a lecture series arranged by Thurneysen at his congregation in Leutwil, Switzerland, in early 1917. Besides Barth and Thurneysen, the list of speakers also included Emil Brunner. The presentation was the last in the series and addressed the question: “What does the Bible say?”⁴¹

Barth begins by running through the broad outlines of the biblical narrative as it develops across the various texts of the Hebrew and Greek scriptures, and asks what the “*one thing*” [*das Eine*] is that unites them all.⁴² The question is explicitly asked in light of the fact that we, engaged reading subjects, always risk projecting our own understanding onto the biblical texts. If we are looking for a strictly historical narrative (in a positivistic sense) we might find only a strictly historical narrative.⁴³ On the other hand, this risk of projecting implies that we ourselves are somehow at stake when we read the biblical texts. And the fact that we actually find ourselves asking the question of what unites the biblical texts implies that we have difficulty immediately comprehending what actually holds them together and thus have difficulty producing a single, unifying concept of their errand.⁴⁴

That said, Barth then shifts the perspective on the biblical texts (in a way akin to how Thurneysen reads Dostoevsky). What holds the texts together is the way they point beyond themselves, beyond us and our

⁴¹ Karl Barth, “Die neue Welt in der Bibel,” in *Karl Barth Gesamtausgabe – Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1914–1921 (GA III)* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2012), 318.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 322.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 323.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 328ff.

world, to an utterly transcendent and unreachable unity that rests with God: “the Bible speaks of *a new world*, God’s world.”⁴⁵ Barth will speak of the “relentless logic” of the biblical texts, which “drives us beyond ourselves.”⁴⁶ If we are to understand the texts we require this radical shift in perspective and must relinquish our own (explicit or implicit) claim if we are to achieve full *comprehension*.

Barth invokes the notion of “*Geschichte*,” which in German stands midway between “history” and “story” (history as narrative), as a key concept, and argues that the Bible recounts “the history of God.” Now an important aspect of our understanding of “history” is that we can ask the question “*Why?*” (*Warum?*). Why did this or that event take place? Why did it happen in this way and not in some other way, and so on?⁴⁷ This is a way of coming to understand who we are—and, furthermore, it provides a key part of the answer by itself being the expression of the freedom of our conceptual engagement with our own existence as historical beings. We can come to a greater understanding of ourselves by engaging in counterfactual reflection on the past—generating hypothetical scenarios that map out a parallel line of reasoning and conjecturing about alternative historical results. In this way, we stress that—as self-conscious and autonomous rational beings—we, humans, are the “masters of our own destiny,” so to speak. Our reasoning is *the* interesting cause or ground of the unfolding of (world) history.

Barth places the “history of God,” as it is expressed in the biblical texts, over and against this understanding of “human history.” The crucial difference is that while human history is determined by investigations into grounds and causes, and the use of counterfactual reflection, the narrative of the biblical texts is structured around the negation of this form of (broadly) philosophical engagement, and thus, implicitly, the negation of the autonomy of the required conceptual abilities insofar as they are applied to the biblical texts. The biblical texts respond to our question(s) “*Why?*” (*Warum?*) with the answer “*Therefore!!*” (*Darum!!*).⁴⁸ (Why were the people of Israel not broken by slavery in Egypt, but were freed from their suffering and led to a new life by Moses? Why did Saul become Paul?

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 323.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 324.

⁴⁷ “*Why* did the people act and speak thus and not otherwise?” *Ibid.*, 326.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 328.

Therefore!!)⁴⁹ These events in the text are expressions of the unfolding of the sovereign will of God, and as such cannot be “second-guessed.”⁵⁰

In other words, according to Barth, to read the Hebrew and Greek scriptures is not a question of engaging in a form of inquiry predicated on human autonomy. To understand the texts we must relinquish the desire to go beyond the (somewhat fragmented) narrative recounted in the texts and comprehend their ground—whether we assume their ground to be of this world or the next. Instead, we are required to think along with the texts as they stand before us, to seek to understand their direction as addressed to us from a point located beyond the conceptual limit they set.⁵¹ We are brought to a point where we can either acknowledge this limit to our inquiry or reject it.⁵² To be brought to this point, where the texts confront us with these two paths of reflection—either thinking along with the texts or against them—is to be presented with the question of “faith.”

Now we should not assume that we know what “faith” is in abstraction. In “The New World in the Bible,” “faith” is presented as a particular form of practical thought, which thinks along with the Biblical texts and follows their “relentless logic.” Barth does not use the term “*Nachdenken*” (afterthought), but that is an essential part of what “faith” turns out to be: the relinquishing of a form of human autonomy for the sake of being able to think along with the biblical texts. “Faith” is something that happens to us as readers. As we read “in faith,” the texts “drive us beyond ourselves” to the recognition that we cannot measure (the sovereign will of) the God of the Bible by our own standards, norms, and reasons. Barth: “When we let ourselves be driven to the ultimate answer, when we have found God in the Bible ... then God stands before us, as the one, that he is.... God is *God*.”⁵³

⁴⁹ Ibid., 327.

⁵⁰ Richard E. Burnett briefly discusses “Die neue Welt in der Bibel” in *Karl Barth’s Theological Exegesis* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), 65–70, where he suggests that Barth’s great discovery is that the Bible is principally concerned with God. It is hard to argue with that. Still, I think Burnett overlooks the critical thrust of Barth’s text: the issue of a radically transcendent *unity*, coupled with the critique of the relationship between human, rational autonomy and historical inquiry in relation to the biblical texts.

⁵¹ Barth, “Die neue Welt,” 332.

⁵² “What is certain is that, when we read the Bible attentively, we are brought straight to the point, where this decision must be made: assume or reject the Kingdom of God [*der Königsherrschaft Gottes*]. That is the *new* world in the Bible.” Ibid., 332.

⁵³ Ibid., 340.

D. I want to take a moment to discuss an important issue in the secondary literature on Barth's early theology. In *Barth-Studien*, Eberhard Jüngel also asks the question that I posed in the section above: what is the status of Barth's claim that "God is God" from the preface to *Romans II*? How does Barth arrive at this insight?

Jüngel's answer is the following: "That God is God—that is Barth's axiom. At that point, at the end of his theological beginnings, this axiom remained a general presupposition, presupposed in just the same sense as a natural theology is."⁵⁴ In light of what Barth says in "The New World in the Bible," I think that Jüngel's claim is mistaken. The formula, "God is God," did not "remain" a general presupposition in 1922. It was not a general presupposition when it appeared five years earlier. And it is not a question of natural theology or presupposed axioms. According to Barth, it is *explicitly* a hard-won recognition derived from reading biblical texts.

So, once again: "... If one were freely to ask me, what ground I have for approaching Romans with this hypothesis, then I would in turn ask whether any serious person (one who has not *already ceased* to take it seriously) could approach the Text with any other hypothesis than that—God is God?"⁵⁵ After this detour through Barth's earlier text, we are a bit closer to understanding what is at stake in this important passage. Yet, it is not only the "tautology" that can initially appear mysterious. So can the qualification of the serious reader as "one who has not already ceased to take the text seriously." At this point, I think that we are also in a position to understand that qualification.

As we saw, Barth argues that we are faced with two options when we approach the biblical text: either we read and think along with it or we reject its arguments out of hand. To want to go beyond the limit to which the texts give expression is to cease to take them seriously. Taking them seriously means following their (relentless) logic: in other words, eventually arriving at the textually mediated recognition that "God is God." We can thus see what Barth means when he argues that we encounter a form of authority which does not ultimately rest with the autonomous subject in what Kant called "biblical theology."

Nonetheless, a key aspect of Barth's early theological approach is still missing: the emphasis on death as the mark of an unsublatable negation. This emphasis is important, because it will provide the solution to

⁵⁴ Eberhard Jüngel, *Barth-Studien* (Zürich-Köln: Benziger Verlag, 1982), 93.

⁵⁵ Barth, *Römerbrief*, xxi.

an uncomfortable question: does Barth promote a form of “revelation positivism” with his appeal to a bald “Therefore!!” in “The New World in the Bible”? Doing so would perhaps make it possible to ascribe a kind of decisionism to Barth, in which case his theology would ultimately rely on some form of human subjectivity as an implicit premise. One important aim of *Romans II* is to disarm that challenge.

E. I have to take another short detour and address the difference between *Romans I* and *Romans II*, as Barth wrote two commentaries on Paul’s letter to the Romans: one in 1919, the other in 1922. In *principle*, the second edition is merely a second edition. In *reality*, it is a different book.

Seen from one angle, “The New World in the Bible” and *Romans I* give expression to many of the same insights. Like “The New World in the Bible,” *Romans I* can be seen as circling around a shift in perspective whereby we recognize that actual unity and comprehension is radically transcendent. In the text Barth urges the reader to recognize that, while our existential history is fragmented, it is held together from a point that is beyond our reach. By recognizing the distinction between the “fragmented world” as perceived “within,” from our point of view, and the “new world” as grasped by God from a point that lies outside the scope of our powers and capacities, our existence and history gains provisional meaning and unity. Christ stands for the moment of “resurrection,” when we come to acknowledge that God holds the world together and gives it meaning from beyond the limits of creaturely existence, affording an eschatological perspective on reality. We find that line of thought expressed in an important opening passage of the commentary: “Our concern [*Sache*] is our knowledge of God [*Erkenntnis Gottes*], realized in Christ, in which God appears close, not as an object, but immediately and creatively, in which we not only see, but *are* seen, not only understand, but *are* understood, not only comprehend, but are *grasped*.”⁵⁶ On the surface, this mirrors the argument of “The New World in the Bible.” Unfortunately, things quickly take a strange turn.

Measured against “The New World in the Bible” *Romans I* also appears as a regression. “The New World in the Bible” is strictly concerned with the reading of biblical texts and it stresses the limit that reading these texts imposes on our conceptual powers: the recognition that “God is God” signals an intra-textual barrier that bars us from claiming access to ultimate transcendent unity and meaning. Instead, we are left with the recognition

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

of a radically foreign perspective on our fragmented world—a perspective that we cannot fully occupy but are driven to acknowledge by the inner structure of the texts. In *Romans I*, a peculiar pseudo-vitalistic positivism sneaks in, as Barth begins to toy with the notion of an organic growth of the kingdom of God as a new historical fellowship. “The Spirit that brings us together hands us this perception of a real life-unity as a positive norm for our togetherness.”⁵⁷ The Spirit of God hands us a positive norm for our this-worldly social interaction. Even if this organic growth of a Christian community armed with positive norms for identifying signs of the Kingdom of God realized immediately and creatively in our world is somehow contingent on “revelation” or “grace,” it still signals a form of positivism that will become unthinkable from *Romans II* onwards.

F. *Romans II* is different. It can be read almost as an attack on the implicit positivism of the first edition. In the textual encounter with Christ, there is *nothing* positive left in our hands that we could use as a norm to determine which of the products of human agency are ultimately valuable in the eyes of God and which are not. For example, Barth writes that “Christ’s congregation knows of no words, works, or things that are holy in themselves; they know only words, works, and things that as negations are sign-posts to the Holy One [*auf den Heiligen hinweisen*].”⁵⁸ All traces of positivism are conscientiously rooted out. On the surface there are similarities between *Romans I* and *Romans II*, but in the latter all the affirmations and insights are mediated by a notion of universal negativity, which transforms both the affirmations and the arguments.

How does Barth come upon this notion of radical negativity? There are two ways to answer that question. First, we can point out that Barth claims to discover it in Paul’s text, where, as we shall see, its acknowledgment structures the overarching argument of the letter to the Romans. Alternatively, we can tell a story about how Barth comes to recognize that this negativity is there to be discovered in Paul’s letter. That is to say, in Paul’s letter Barth recognizes a form of thinking with which he is already somewhat familiar.

In the second preface, Barth tells the reader that he has now read the radical Basle Church historian Franz Overbeck.⁵⁹ A defining difference

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 476.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁵⁹ Barth writes that four primary factors led him to his revision of *Romans*. The first is a closer acquaintance with Paul’s other epistles. The second is reading Franz Overbeck. There

between *Romans I* and *II* is that Barth has now sought to engage with the “concrete mystery” (*das sachliche Rätsel*) that Overbeck posed to us once and for all, a mystery or puzzle that is not to be understood biographically or psychologically.⁶⁰ And in the last section of the posthumously published *Christentum und Kultur*, “On myself and on Death,” Overbeck writes: “Death is for us humans the prickliest mystery [*das empfindlichste Rätsel*] in the world.”⁶¹ The mystery to which Barth refers is Overbeck’s take on death.

At the time, Overbeck was best known for his long and loyal friendship with Nietzsche and for his radical critique of Christianity, theology, and culture. He expressed the latter primarily in his book, *Über die Christlichkeit unsere heutigen Theologie*. On inspection Overbeck’s understanding of death proves to be closely tied to his critique of various forms of theology and culture, but it is striking that it is first and foremost his singular take on death that helps Barth unlock what he takes to be Paul’s overarching argument in Romans.⁶² As Thurneysen writes to Barth in a letter dated May 5, 1920 concerning a conversation he has had with his colleague, Samuel Dieterle: “... Alas he does not understand our ‘wisdom of death,’ our ‘beyond the cleft’ and ‘behind the narrow gate’... It is clearer and clearer to me that it was only with our insight into Overbeck’s Halt! And No! that a first important stepping stone was laid ... and on which the knowledge, which you worked out and represented in the *Römerbrief*, also first becomes quite true and can be vigorously defended.”⁶³ Before progressing any more deeply into the argumentative structure of Barth’s *Romans II* I want to examine Overbeck’s “wisdom of death,” his “Halt! and No!”

G. In the last section of *Christentum und Kultur* Overbeck, drawing on the radical distinction between this life and death, argues for a particular form of skepticism: “Certainly, we know too much, too much, especially

Barth is referring to *Christentum und Kultur*, which was first published posthumously by C. A. Bernoulli in 1919 exactly between *Romans I* and *II*. *Ibid.*, xiii.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, xiii ff.

⁶¹ Franz Overbeck, *Christentum und Kultur* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1963), 298.

⁶² I am inclined to think that Barth and Thurneysen began to read Overbeck’s *Christentum und Kultur* because of his criticism of Christianity and culture, and that it was only as they actually read him that they realized that Overbeck’s take on death provided them with a key theological concept. Unfortunately, this cannot be proved definitively on the basis of available sources.

⁶³ Karl Barth, *Karl Barth–Eduard Thurneysen Briefwechsel (band. 1 1913–1921)* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1973), 388.

of things, of which we can know nothing, of last things, of death.”⁶⁴ In fact, that people have opinions concerning how things stand with what is *beyond* this life underscores just how little we have even begun to understand how things stand in our actual world.⁶⁵ A slightly more crass formulation of Overbeck’s point would be that it is precisely because we form notions of states of affairs that obtain *beyond* this world, which we are more or less ready to discuss seriously, that all our positive theories of how things are structured *in* this world merit deep suspicion. In other words, there is only a small step from Overbeck’s skepticism about our theoretical grasp of the world to a thoroughgoing critique of our supposed theoretical grasp of the world.

Either way, the critical leverage comes from the acknowledgment of death as an absolute epistemic category. Indeed, Barth explicitly quotes Overbeck⁶⁶: “Death is the moment of our individual life, where within the same sphere the unknown steps in; in which for us, in terms of our lives, everything is located that lies beyond the known world—an utterly indifferent moment for human beings lacking consciousness, a moment of singular and unimaginable significance for a human being, insofar as he, with the distinction between what is known and unknown, has entered into possession of consciousness.”⁶⁷ Death presents an absolute void that is concretely present in our lives and which relativizes our claims to knowledge. This void cannot be circumvented or penetrated by thought. To use a Hegelian-dialectical term, it cannot be “sublated” (*aufgehoben*).

The point is not that this gives us license to engage in some descendant of Cartesian or Humean skepticism concerning our concrete experience of the things we encounter in the world. As Barth writes in his own short 1920 text on Overbeck, “Unresolved Questions for Today’s Theology”: when it comes to investigations that are strictly limited to things of *this* world we should follow the common-sense realism of the Enlightenment thinkers. Yet the moment when we begin to invoke forms of knowledge

⁶⁴ Overbeck, *Christentum und Kultur*, 293.

⁶⁵ “That we humans do not know about how things actually stand with the world, how it originated, how it is to be governed, and where it is headed, is a fact. The persuasion of individual men of a world beyond this world on top of this ignorance, confirms this fact much more than it dissolves it.” *Ibid.*, 294.

⁶⁶ Karl Barth, “Unerledigte Anfrage an die Heutige Theologie,” in *Karl Barth Gesamtausgabe – Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1914–1921 (GA III)* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2012), 639.

⁶⁷ Overbeck, *Christentum und Kultur*, 297.

that exceed what is given within the bounds of the spatial and temporal unfolding of our existence we reveal that a “capacity for ecstasy” is our “culture’s actual source of power.”⁶⁸ This tendency towards ecstasy inevitably makes us swerve into the realm of ideology and fantasy. Even “rationalism” as a way of ordering life is thus partially colored by this ecstatic drive towards overstepping the absolute limit that death imposes.⁶⁹ For the theologian, the interesting aspect of the argument is that Christianity has played an important role in bringing about this critical insight. Overbeck writes: “Who, then, would want to blame Christianity for the fact that, with its *Memento Mori*, it turned all of its attention to this moment?”⁷⁰

In this context, Overbeck toys with the possibility of a “positive” role for theology. Rather than constituting a discipline that generates metaphysical claims about how things stand with this world as well as the next, if theology is pushed to recognize itself as a form of thought that draws attention to this unsublatable negativity and thus takes seriously its own traditional emphasis on the *memento mori*, it can become the discipline that guards this limit and thus seeks to negate all ecstatic temptations to posit some positive knowledge of the beyond. And if this were to happen, and—by means of a struggle with itself—theology were to become the guardian of humanity’s limits in the face of death, finally and radically liberating us from all pseudo-gods and transcendent otherworldliness, then who is he, Overbeck, to deny it that distinction?⁷¹

So when Barth refers to Overbeck as that “peculiar and strangely pious man” he is pointing to Overbeck’s subtle suggestion that it is an option for Christianity to become (once again, perhaps) the discourse that guards the absolute limits of human thought, when it is viewed in light of the radical negativity of death.⁷² It serves to provide a critical corrective to the ecstatic tendencies of our form of reasoning. This would return theology to a key insight of the earliest Christianity—a return to the actual understanding of *eschatology*.

⁶⁸ Barth, “Unerledigte Anfrage,” 640.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 640.

⁷⁰ Overbeck, *Christentum und Kultur*, 297.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 292.

⁷² Barth, *Römerbrief*, xiii. Overbeck goes as far as explicitly invoking Psalm 39 as the most beautiful expression of a form of thought that is not silenced or cowed by the acknowledgment of death as the absolute border to the unknown. Overbeck, *Christentum und Kultur*, 299.

Thus in the section “Christianity (Eschatology)—General” from his unfinished and posthumously published *Kirchenlexikon*, Overbeck writes: “All conceptions of Christianity, including those that oppose it, must ultimately seek the highest wisdom that Christianity has for us, whether mystical or rationalistic, in Christian eschatology, that is, in its doctrine of the future or of death. Then Christianity is nothing other than the wisdom of death. It teaches us exactly what death teaches us, not more nor less; nor does it help us any more or less.”⁷³ According to Overbeck, eschatology is not initially a form of theorizing about some positive existence found beyond this world but, rather, the sudden emergence of the absolutely unknown, beyond our possible comprehension, into this world in the form of death. This is Christianity’s greatest insight. With that in mind, I want to dig a bit deeper into the structure of Barth’s argument in *Romans II*.

H. On an abstract level, *Romans II* can be read as a study in how far it is possible to go when thinking a universal and unsublatable negation through to the end. The greatest temptation and danger, when reading Barth’s actual commentary on Paul in *Romans II*, is thus to want too much. It is to want to find positive doctrine, where the text presents the reader with negations alone; to measure the text’s claims against some positive conception of how things ought to be. When one approaches the text, it helps to keep in mind what Thurneysen wrote concerning the genius of Dostoevsky’s writings: “To want more would be to want less.”⁷⁴ To understand the text is to be willing to enter into its inner tension with the text’s own more or less clearly given concepts as the only aid.⁷⁵

I have argued that, in “The New World in the Bible,” an essential aspect of how Barth understands faith was expressed in the praxis of reading along with the text without importing extraneous norms for determining its meaning. Faith is a willingness to accept the way one is addressed by the text and to think along the limits it imposes on our subjective capacities. That is certainly the case in *Romans II*. According to Barth, Paul’s letter wants to teach us what the word “God” means (alternatively, “who God is”), what faith is, and how to read biblical texts—all at the same time: “The faithfulness of God is that he, as the absolutely other, as the holy one, confronts and pursues us in such an inescapable way with his No.

⁷³Franz Overbeck, *Werke und Nachlass 4 – Kirchenlexicon Texte* (Stuttgart: Verlag J. B. Metzler, 1995), 183.

⁷⁴Thurneysen, *Dostoevsky*, 45; *Dostojewski*, 33.

⁷⁵Barth, *Römerbrief*, xviii.

And the faith of man is the awe that God has let this No fall upon him, it is to will the void, the moving perseverance in the negation. Where the faithfulness of God encounters the faith of man, God's righteousness is revealed.... This is the issue on which the letter to the Romans turns."⁷⁶ In other words, we are called to read in view of the negation expressed in the divine No: a moving perseverance in face of the negation. In Barth's commentary, this negation explicitly takes center stage in the second major section, "The Night," which is the exegesis of Rom. I, 18–32.

On the surface, these Pauline passages might seem to challenge Barth's (in)famous rejection of natural theology. There Paul writes that "... the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men who by their wickedness suppress the truth. *For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made*" (Rom. I, 18–20; my emphasis). Here Barth seems unequivocally confronted with Paul, the natural theologian.

In fact, Barth reads these passages as a confirmation of his rejection of natural theology, because he finds in them an anticipation of Overbeck's eschatological *Todesweisheit*. As Overbeck wrote in the *Kirchenlexicon*: "Then Christianity is nothing other than the wisdom of death. It teaches us exactly what death teaches us, not more nor less; nor does it help us any more or less."⁷⁷ According to Overbeck, while Christianity has paid it particular attention, death remains a universal "phenomenon" that is available to be grasped by anybody. As Barth reads him, Paul has understood that what is revealed in creation is the omnipresence of death as an absolute limit or boundary that cannot be circumvented. This unsublatable negativity marks an unbridgeable difference between all things of this world on the one hand and the eternal power and deity of God on the other. And when death is understood in this way, as a radical and unsublatable negativity, Barth can agree that it makes God known universally *per negationem* and that this acknowledgment can be won by examining the world as it is.⁷⁸ In other words, what is perceived in all created things are their essential finitude and, when it comes to organic life, their inescapable mortality. It thus becomes clear that all these things are "Not-God," as Barth dryly puts it.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Ibid., 18.

⁷⁷ Overbeck, *Werke und Nachlass*, 183.

⁷⁸ Barth, *Römerbrief*, 32.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 20.

I. At this point it is important to resist the urge to fill out the void created by the universal negation. Invoking a sphere of creation on the one hand and the power of God on the other, as I did above, can seem to suggest some form of dualism, where both positions are occupied by some positive entity. Instead one should follow Walter Lowe who, in the article “Barth as a Critic of Dualism,” argued that in *Romans II* Barth strongly criticizes dualism and explicitly argues that it is a key symptom of humanity’s fallen state.⁸⁰ To understand how, it is important to keep in mind that the section, “The Night,” begins with the following declaration: “God! We do not know, what that word means [*was wir damit sagen*].”⁸¹ An essential aim of the section is to bring about the recognition that, left on our own, we inevitably fail to give any real meaning to the word “God.” In other words, we are to see that the various positive propositions that we are inclined to construct in which the word “God” appears turn out to be meaningless.⁸²

So it is not that *Romans II* invokes some already known being, “God,” and then goes on to argue that this entity actually turns out to reside beyond our cognitive reach in some other sphere over and above this world. Such a claim would be as senseless as all other claims to have knowledge of God—other claims to have immediate and positive knowledge of what the word means.⁸³ In light of the absolute limit that death imposes, they all stand revealed as equally absurd. As Barth writes: “We think that we know what we mean when we say ‘God.’ We position him at the highest point in our world. Thus we essentially place him on a continuous line

⁸⁰Lowe, “Barth as a Critic,” 377–95.

⁸¹Barth, *Der Römerbrief*, 19. This is as good a place as any to mention that Edwyn C. Hoskyns’s English translation of *Der Römerbrief* is useless for any serious scholarly purpose. For example, Hoskyns’s translation of “Gott! Wir wissen nicht, was wir damit sagen. Wer glaubt, der weiss, dass wir es nicht wissen” is “In the name of God! We know not what we should say to this. The believer knows our ignorance.” That is simply not what Barth wrote, nor does it communicate his intention in any recognizable form. Such examples abound.

⁸²I want to draw an analogy to Ludwig Wittgenstein’s definition of nonsense in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. There Wittgenstein writes: “Frege says that any legitimately constructed proposition must have a sense. And I say that any possible proposition is legitimately constructed, and, if it has no sense, that can only be because we have failed to give a meaning to some of its constituents. (Even if we think we have done so.)” *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press International, 1961), 48 (5.4733).

⁸³I take it that “not actually knowing what one is saying” works as a definition of “nonsense.” Certainly, it is how Barth uses “*Unsinn*” in *Romans II*.

with ourselves and with things.”⁸⁴ The point here is precisely to put an end to all such claims to knowledge, and to underscore that the thought to which we suppose they give expression turns out to be merely the appearance of a thought. As the logician Gottlob Frege might have put it: such “thoughts” turn out to stand to actual thought as stage-thunder stands to actual thunder.

Now if the paramount concept governing claims to knowledge of things beyond the line of death is revealed to be empty, thus appearing to render the propositions in which it appears nonsensical, it becomes easy to see how the rot can spread. First, many other purported theories about how things ought to be arranged in this world were developed alongside or on the basis of religious claims or doctrines that now appear to be transgressing the limit that death imposes on our knowledge.⁸⁵ These theories immediately become open to a similar critique. Furthermore, theories about how things ought to be that are not explicitly religious in a doctrinal sense also appear suspect, insofar as they turn out to rely either explicitly or implicitly on claims to know how things stand beyond the line of death. We come to see how time and mortality undermine a whole host of notions and norms that appear to help us navigate through our existence and glue our reality together.⁸⁶

It requires only a slight nudge to turn Overbeck’s skepticism concerning our ecstatic theoretical ambitions into Barth’s criticism of our normative theoretical pretensions. If “Religion” is defined as the disposition to make claims or prescribe norms that purport to give meaning to and be grounded in something that transcends the line of death, then the critique of religion becomes the critique of history, culture, philosophy, psychology, and politics—insofar as we want to derive insights and norms that transcend our immediate existence from them. It is not merely a matter of correcting theoretical mistakes, but, rather, it is a comprehensive reconceptualization of the coordinates of our existence as such.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Barth, *Der Römerbrief*, 20.

⁸⁵ “‘God’ is even ideology, when people occupy the standpoint of God in the absence of God, where God himself, God alone is not one and all, and instead humanity—even in the finest and noblest sense—wants to be something and make something involving God.” *Ibid.*, 53.

⁸⁶ “Thus the last emptying and decomposition appears, chaos disintegrates into its components, and all things become possible. Now atoms whirl, now the struggle for existence rages. Reason itself becomes unreasonable, and, lacking its metallic strength for support, so do the thoughts of duty and community.” *Ibid.*, 31.

⁸⁷ “Thus that God is not recognized [*erkannt*] as God does not signify a mental [*innerlichen*] or theoretical mistake, but a false attitude towards life.” *Ibid.*, 26.

In Barth's reading of Paul, this reconceptualization in light of this comprehensive criticism or deconstruction of given human standards, standpoints, and worldviews is identical to the recognition of the "wrath of God against the false gods of this world." This is important, because we must be careful to distinguish between what Barth takes to be a textual argument that Paul makes and an immediate critique of humanity's various metaphysical commitments. Overbeck's skepticism points in the direction of the latter. Barth insists that all he is doing is reading and elucidating a biblical text, and if Paul's critique of idolatry in Romans happens to strike home when we read it today, so much the better.

At this point, Barth has begun to walk the dialectical tightrope that is *Romans II*. In raising the question of the meaning of the word "God" and invoking the universal negativity that death signals, the contours of an affirmative form of "theological" discourse begins to emerge. The negation of our immediate attempts to ascribe meaning to the word "God" begins to take on a positive significance. As Barth puts it: "The exposure of nonsense [*Un-Sinns*] is also the revelation of meaning [*Sinns*]." ⁸⁸ The question is: what separates a potentially affirmative discourse about "God," which takes the universal negation into account, from other claims to have knowledge about how things stand beyond the line of death?

J. From one point of view, I could be accused of having put the cart before the horse in my treatment of Barth's early dialectical theology. I have written very little about Christology, and, surely, Jesus Christ is at the heart of Barth's theology. I have taken the detour to bring a particular conceptual landscape into view: the actual context in which the concepts Barth uses have their home.

We grasp a concept by understanding the context and practice within which it is legitimately used. And by Barth's lights the context in which the concepts "God" and "Christ" might actually prove to have a legitimate sense is that of the biblical scriptures and the practice of reading and explicating them. We have just seen how Barth argues that, at a minimum, all talk of "God" which does *not* take place within this context and this praxis is revealed to be nonsense. Now the question is whether it is possible that the concept "God" can be affirmed as making sense *within* this context and praxis.

According to the dialectical theologians "God" should first and foremost be understood as a word in a (biblical) text and its actual meaning—insofar

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 56.

as it proves to have one—must be derived from the text’s argument. It is here that the name, “Jesus Christ,” becomes crucial for Barth. He writes: “There is one claim to salvation from the anger of God: where all claims have been abandoned, struck down by God himself, where God’s No is recognized as final, God’s wrath recognized as unavoidable, God is acknowledged as God. There, where *the* story between God and man begins, where there is no prior story to be told, because it is strictly happening, eternally happening; there, where humanity dares—knowing that it is no recipe for salvation, but the eternal ground of [salvation’s] acknowledgment—to stand in the air and to love the unfathomable God. That is what is at stake in Jesus Christ.”⁸⁹ Once we have left our metaphysical presuppositions behind, we can begin to let the text teach us how the concept “God” ought to be used. Invoking the tautology first developed in “The New World in the Bible,” to acknowledge God as God in this comprehensive way is the first step towards being able to use the concept in a meaningful sense, as all immediately given, extra-textual notions of who or what “God” is are critically negated. Discovering the meaning of “God” is a question of reading in a particular way in light of the biblical affirmation of Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ.

K. We shall see that there is both a negative and a positive aspect of the affirmation of Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ. We can narrow in on this dialectical turn by seeing how “God’s judgment” [*Das Gericht Gottes*] and “righteousness of God” [*Gerechtigkeit Gottes*] are two sides of the same coin in Barth’s reading of Paul. The judgment of God is the negativity that exposes the groundlessness (meaninglessness) of our claims to transcendent knowledge, resulting in a comprehensive reevaluation of our existence. God’s righteousness is the way an affirmative form of discourse takes shape in light of the negativity revealed. It is the way the concept of God can gain an actual affirmative sense, the *Sinn* that appears as a possibility once we have distinguished the proper use from those that result in *Unsinn*. In *Romans II* the name, Jesus Christ, is the knot that ties these two moments together and inaugurates the eschatological critique and reevaluation of our existence. Or, as we shall see, the name, Jesus Christ, forces us to approach the text in a particular way.

Much therefore hinges on how we read and translate Paul’s claim in Romans 3:22 that the “δικαιοσύνη δε θεου δια πιστεως Ιησου Χριστου” has been manifested apart from the law. This is Barth’s translation of and

⁸⁹ Ibid., 55.

commentary on that passage: “God’s righteousness reveals itself ‘*through his faithfulness in Jesus Christ.*’ The faithfulness of God is the divine insistence, whose power at many scattered points in history again and again gives opportunities, occasions, and testimonies to the recognition [*Erkenntnis*] of [God’s] righteousness. Among these many points, Jesus of Nazareth is the one in whom these acts are recognized in their unified significance as a line, as the true thread of history. Christ is the content of this knowledge: the righteousness of God himself.”⁹⁰ This is the moment where all the various claims and inferences of the letter can be seen to begin to fall into a discernible order and where we find the initial outline of an affirmative theological praxis.

As Bent Flemming Nielsen has pointed out, this is also a moment in the commentary at which Barth “goes behind Paul’s back, so to speak.”⁹¹ For Paul, although “Christ” is a messianic title, the words “Jesus Christ” often appear to function as a self-standing unit. Nonetheless, Barth wants to signal that there is a particular thought behind this combined name and title, which can be made explicit. So, in the quote above Barth pulls the words “Jesus” and “Christ” apart to analyze the full intended meaning of the concept of Jesus as the Christ. He does this by examining how it is used within the horizon outlined by the relevant set of texts concerned with the faithfulness of God (Barth’s shorthand is “the Law and the Prophets”). Here the sequence of narrative events that make up what can be said about the figure, Jesus, culminates in a moment of pure negativity, which discloses the actual sense of the “faithfulness of God.” The acknowledgment of this moment of negativity is what is captured in the messianic title, “Christ.”

Barth:

The faithfulness of God is his persistence and perseverance in the deepest human questionableness and darkness. The life of Jesus is the complete obedience to the will of the faithful God.... He places himself entirely under the judgment under which the world stands. He places himself where God can only be present as the question of God.... He goes to the cross, to death. At his highest point, at the end of his journey, he is a purely negative entity: in no way a genius, in no way the bearer of manifest or occult psychic powers, no hero, leader, poet or thinker, and right in this negation, precisely here, he sacrifices all the genial, psychic, heroic, aesthetic, philosophical, all

⁹⁰ Ibid., 77 (emphasis added).

⁹¹ Nielsen, *Die Rationalität*, 19.

conceivable human possibilities to an impossible *More*, to an invisible *Other*; precisely in this he is the fulfiller of the law and the prophets, who points beyond himself, beyond the accumulating human possibilities of progress. *Therefore* he has exalted God, *in this* he is acknowledged as the Christ, *through* this he is the light of the last things that illuminates all.... The messiah is the end of man.⁹²

L. There is a lot at stake here. A number of seemingly distinct levels of Barth's argument are brought together, and it is important to keep all of them in mind to grasp all the implications. As mentioned earlier, an important part of the argument depends on directing the reader to the text in a particular way.

Thus far a number of my arguments concerning the role of the biblical text have implicitly drawn on what Barth develops here. With this passage we can recognize how the death of Jesus as the Christ already structured various aspects of Paul's argument. Thus the assertion from the section, "The Night," which asserts that God's invisible nature is revealed *per negationem* in the finitude and mortality of all things created, is only fully understood from the revelation of the messiah as the end of man. As a purely negative entity Jesus Christ allows us to apprehend the full extent of the theological significance of the unsublatable negation that death is by acting in light of an "impossible More" to which he sacrifices all human possibilities. So, in light of the passage above it becomes clear how the various arguments and claims of the text mutually elucidate each other by each giving expression to a different aspect of the negativity revealed in the name, Jesus Christ.

This mutual elucidation is one aspect of the "turn to the text" that I invoked above, but there is more to it. It is important to keep in mind that the voice of the commentator in *Romans II* is the voice of an engaged reader. An essential purpose of the commentary is thus to draw attention to the way the reader or interpreter is implicated in the gradual unfolding of the negation of all human possibilities that ends with the death of Jesus on the cross. A set of positions (or interpretive lenses) that the reader can occupy when approaching the text and from which he or she can judge—either positively or negatively—the correctness of the claims that the text is making are also drawn into the negation. The reader (of both letter and commentary) is to recognize that he or she is already deeply immersed in

⁹² Barth, *Römerbrief*, 77.

the questionableness that the figure of Jesus exposes. The extra-textual norms that initially appear to provide a standard by which to critically evaluate Paul's account of God's righteousness are—the moment they are invoked to gain a reflective distance from the unsublatable negativity expressed in our finitude and death—revealed as attempts to establish a position beyond the critical limit to our knowledge that death represents. Actual understanding is a matter of thinking along with the way the text's own concepts stand in relation to each other. It exhibits a particular way of reading as an anti-metaphysical theological practice.

This entails that Barth's commentary on Paul's text has to assume a particular form. If the text itself unfolds a critique of the reading subject, the reflecting reader and commentator cannot simultaneously be faithful to its critical argument and appeal to modes of explication that are external to it to account for its conceptual structure.⁹³ The commentary thus needs to adopt a particular rhetoric whereby the text's concepts play a central part in their own elucidation. The commentator cannot shift to an alternative meta-language to explain their meaning. Instead he or she must resort to an expressive strategy, where Paul's use of a particular concept in multiple arguments and claims internal to the text mediates its sense. We come to understand them by seeing how they are actually used and examining how far we can stretch them without invoking anything that is heteronomous to the concrete wording of the text. To that extent bombastic expressions and claims may thus serve an elucidating purpose in emphasizing a certain aspect or sharply negating another. The point is that this expressive rhetoric requires the reader to think along with the commentary, and thus the text as well, without having ready-made definitions available and thus implicitly ascertaining mastery over the subject of Paul's letter. There is an experimental dimension in Barth's form of presentation. The expressive form underscores the central critical and practical aspects.

M. A set of conventional expectations concerning the form and purpose of a critical commentary are consciously challenged in *Romans II*. The critical relationship between reader and text are reversed; the distinction between reader and author (or commentator) becomes blurred; the linear progression of arguments is exchanged for a dialectical form,

⁹³ "... Eine Mitteilung, die nicht nur auf Notiznahme, sondern Teilnahme, nicht nur auf Verstand, sondern auf Verständnis, nicht nur auf Mitgefühl, sondern auf Mitarbeit rechnet, eine Mitteilung, die Glauben an Gott, an Gott selbst, voraussetzt, indem sie ihn schafft." *Ibid.*, 4.

whereby the various concepts mutually elucidate each other and take on their sense in light of a fundamental negativity. It wants to be read at least twice: one has to get to the end of the book and then go back and start from the beginning to understand the full scope of its argument. This lends a particular significance to the fact that the text is a second edition, where next to nothing remains of the first edition. One way to describe this challenging aspect is to point out that *Romans II* does not try to teach its reader a particular theory. Rather, it tries to get the reader to do something, to engage in a particular practice exemplified by the author–reader of the commentary. In this way, many of the claims of *Romans II* can be seen as analogous to a proposition in Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*: we are not meant to hold on to them as definitive attempts to say how things stand, but to make use of them to see how a certain form of thought that we initially assumed made sense turns out to be a blind alley—after which they can be left behind.⁹⁴ The essential aim is to change how we engage in a particular activity—for Wittgenstein, it is philosophy, and for Barth, theology. As Barth writes in a key programmatic statement: “No ‘praxis’ *alongside* the theory is recommended here; rather, it is ascertained that even the ‘theory’ with which we have hitherto been concerned is *the theory of praxis*.”⁹⁵ The theology of *Romans II* is something that one must continuously do, which is why it can prove difficult to give a straightforward theoretical account of its aim. We cannot simply state it as the content of a doctrine.

N. I want to turn now to the affirmative aspect of *Romans II*. In light of what is negated, the reader is confronted with Paul’s text in a way that also results in a series of affirmations. If we follow the argument that Barth reads Paul as making, we are already on the way to replacing the metaphysical notions of “God” with a series of textually bound uses of the concept. When we think in light of the negativity revealed, our own autonomous subjectivity can no longer provide a measure of the correctness of the text’s claims. Instead our role as readers becomes that of giving voice to the authority manifested in the text itself. The comprehensive and radical critique of the various human normative positions pushes the reader to acknowledge a free and sovereign subjectivity of another order. Jesus’s actions indirectly bring to light a position that we are unable to subject to judgment but which passes judgment on us. We could say that

⁹⁴ Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 74 (6.54).

⁹⁵ Barth, *Der Römerbrief*, 450.

the text implicitly addresses us from a position located beyond the power and reach of our normative grasp. Jesus's actions provide the coordinates that outline a radically different standpoint grounded in a radically different form of knowledge: "The standpoint of the letter to the Romans, if taken as a 'standpoint,' is the standpoint of God."⁹⁶ Very broadly, this is what the concept "God" stands for in Paul's text: "It is the Objectivity that beholds us before we have even begun to behold it. The primary Objectivity that grounds the perceiving subject.... It is the Subjectivity [*das Subjektive*] that stands over and against all I, You and He in the most uncanny and liberating way, whom it thus objectively accompanies in all its [various] paths with its own immanent critical sublation."⁹⁷ In Jesus's death as the Christ a singular form of judgment falls on the human subject, which cannot be reduced or traced back to any of the various positions that the human subject can occupy, since it proceeds from the realm of the absolutely unknowable. In this specific sense, the text's use of the death of Jesus instantiates a form of thinking that is structured around a radically transcendent unity that cannot find a place in our human discourse other than through the critique of our metaphysical presumptions on the one hand and the affirmation of the text's own proclamation concerning the lordship of God on the other.

I will explore this further in a later section. Provisionally, the correct thing to say here is that eschatology does not primarily mean that we now know God, but rather that God knows and passes judgment on us. By means of this acknowledgment, the Bible's eschatological concept of God begins to take on an affirmative sense. Thus Barth can write that "... [b]ecause [Jesus Christ] is Lord over Paul and the Romans, 'God' is not an empty word in the letter to the Romans."⁹⁸

O. This does not mean that we can simply take everything in *Romans II* that comes in roughly propositional form as unproblematic bids at how things stand. As I mentioned in section **M**, there are a series of formulations that could be left behind once we have come to understand the change in theological praxis. Furthermore, in *Romans II* Barth uses a series of paradoxes or contradictions to express how negativity ought to structure our thinking. This is not without its problems and I want to examine this seemingly questionable rhetorical device more closely.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 543.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 295.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 7.

In fact, both Barth and Thurneysen tend to use paradoxical formulations in their argument in their early texts. One such formulation is the “impossible possibility” (*die unmögliche Möglichkeit*). To explain why they use this formulation it can (to some extent) be useful to follow the Scholastic principle: “When you encounter a contradiction, you must make a distinction.” And an “impossible possibility” is a contradiction. Still, when we examine how it is used in the text, we see that the phrase “impossible possibility” conflates the way these modal concepts are used in relation to two distinct forms of agency. In this sense, “impossible” pertains to the realm of creaturely existence and our conceptual capacities as self-conscious subjects in particular. “Possibility” pertains to the agency of the subject of the divine judgment revealed in Jesus Christ: the biblical God.⁹⁹

Yet once we make this distinction *we* immediately run the risk of obscuring crucial dimensions of Barth’s and Thurneysen’s argument. They are constantly aware that they are thinking and writing from inside the position that is determined by the unsublatable negativity. The problem is that once we begin to positively distinguish between these two qualitatively different forms of agency, we soon end up overstepping the negativity and fall into the metaphysical and dualistic way of conceiving God that the dialectical theologians wanted us to leave behind in the first place. We immediately run the risk of describing the relationship between God and humanity from a sideways-on perspective, as if we could encompass both from some third position. If we continue along the line of thinking that the affirmation of the divine subject seems to outline at this point, and go to the end, we end up occupying a conceptual position that *Romans II* means to exclude. This is where Barth and Thurneysen once again want to underscore the brokenness of our theoretical grasp. And one function of the paradoxical formulation as a rhetorical device is thus to block the temptation to claim some form of positive understanding whereby we can directly posit God as some particular entity over and against the realm of creation. It must be made clear that the conceptual position that suggests itself is not one that we can legitimately occupy—thus the paradoxical formulation. In this sense, we can understand why it is used, even if our immediate inclination is to reject it as senseless (which it is, if we take its point to be stating that “something is false and necessarily false and not necessarily false”).

⁹⁹ Ibid., 55.

This does not entail that understanding this particular aspect of its use solves the problem, which is that Barth and Thurneysen find themselves in a situation in which they are forced to simultaneously affirm and undermine a set of positive doctrinal formulations concerning God's agency and action that would otherwise appear as a logical extension of their argument. The price of following through on a particular line of reasoning concerning divine agency is falling into metaphysics, so they face a choice: either use a paradox as an expression of the acknowledgment of how the freedom of the divine subject undermines all creaturely claims to sovereignty, doctrinal claims in particular—or commit to something that cannot but sound like an endorsement of the very thing they are trying to reject. They opt for the first and use the paradoxes as a way of showing how the negativity as well as the affirmative praxis entails that we run up against particular conceptual deadlocks and barriers, where theological propositions cease to make sense—from our creaturely, human, and death-bound point of view.

So, Barth knows that the paradoxes are nonsensical and that using them is problematic. The point is that the reader is not supposed to consider them as propositions or assertions to which he or she can commit, since they imply a position of knowledge to which we have no access. There is thus an important distinction running through the various propositions of *Romans II*. On the one hand we have positive assertions concerning the freedom, love, and sovereignty of God, which are legitimate expressions of affirmation in light of the negativity. As Barth writes: "The recognition of God will now be the recognition of this [exclusive and singular] sovereignty of God, which is never to be abandoned, never settled, and never in any sense behind us. It would be the constantly practiced critical distinction between the righteousness of God and all (all!) human righteousness."¹⁰⁰ On the other hand are claims that will tempt us to install some form of constant and reliable meta-vocabulary that generates the illusion of being able to flesh out such affirmations and their implication in positive scholastic terms and thus provide some stable and comprehensible theory about our relationship to eternity beyond the line of death—the temptation of the sideways-on perspective, a position that we are excluded from occupying as creatures.

Barth captures the distinction in another text from the period: "I would characterize our situation with the following three sentences: *as theologians we ought to speak of God. We are, however, human and as such cannot*

¹⁰⁰ Barth, *Der Römerbrief*, 390.

speak of God. We should recognize both, our 'ought' and our 'cannot,' and thus give God the glory. That is our predicament. Everything else is child's play."¹⁰¹ It is precisely the possibility of occupying a sideways-on, "God's-eye point of view" that is excluded in these sentences. Furthermore, we see that the theoretical tension that the praxis inaugurates, the primary and legitimate form of affirmation, turns out to be *doxology*. According to Barth, we understand the praxis when we realize that even when the critique of metaphysics is well under way it should result not in the construction of a theory but in the glorification of God.

Essentially, the point is this: when Barth writes *Romans II* he considers it a critical insight that the affirmations to which we have to commit (the praise of the sovereign subjectivity of God) continuously push us beyond what we can actually comprehend. In light of the text we are brought to affirm and proclaim propositions and statements that we can account for only by pointing to the underlying praxis and the negativity to which it gives expression. In this way many of the affirmations turn out to be extensions of the critical and deconstructive line of reflection and praxis, since they implicitly express a negation of our conceptual capacities as well. In other words, in *Romans II* we find that an important role of the affirmations of the sovereignty of God is pointing to the negation of our power of conceptual mediation and thus underscoring the early theology's critique of human rationality. Where, on the surface, it might seem tempting to conclude that we have license to draw further inferences and gain a more comprehensive grasp of our assertions, an actual understanding of the structuring praxis brings us to a halt. The paradoxical formulations are reminders that we should hold back from occupying a set of tempting "theoretical," conceptual positions.

P. Before moving on I want to examine in greater detail how Barth understands the epistemological relationship between faith and knowledge as it is worked out in *Romans II*. In the present section, I will examine primarily the formal aspect of the relationship. In the next section, I will examine primarily the content.

In the third part of the third chapter, "By Faith Alone," Barth asks what grounds the possibility of actually articulating and declaring the acknowledgment of God's sovereign act of revelation in Jesus Christ to be true.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ Karl Barth, "Das Wort Gottes," 151 (Barth's emphasis).

¹⁰² Barth, *Römerbrief*, 91.

Or, put differently: “What do we know of the works and acts of God?”¹⁰³ Barth warns the reader that there is a wrong way to approach this question. We might be tempted to think that an answer should explain how the human knower comes to this knowledge of his or her own accord. Understood in that way, the question seems to invite a straightforward investigation into our own human conceptual capacities. As a form of self-knowledge the knowledge asked about would then be conceived broadly as some form of manifestation of the spontaneity of the self-conscious subject, underscoring a tendency towards maximizing the scope of the human intellect.¹⁰⁴ And, as an *act of knowing*, that would not, strictly speaking, express a limit to our conceptual capacities but rather reaffirm our power to know.¹⁰⁵ Instead, Barth is asking what it means *to come to know* something where part of the knowledge is the recognition that we have no *ability* to discover it on our own. In other words, the issue of faith and knowledge concerns the possibility of obtaining and maintaining a form of knowledge where the agency involved cannot be ascribed principally to us.¹⁰⁶ According to Barth, this singular form of knowledge is *faith*.

In section C. I argued that faith was a form of *Nachdenken* understood as thinking and reading along with the biblical texts without importing extraneous norms for evaluating their claims. It thus includes a practically mediated acknowledgment of the limits of the self-conscious subject’s autonomy. This implicitly suggests that faith is not simply *reducible* to the decision to read along with the texts, but at the very least also includes a form of acknowledgment or recognition produced by that praxis.

Knowledge is intuitively conceived as something we have or possess. Nonetheless, Barth has in mind here a form of knowledge we do not “have” in the sense of possession, where possessing something is to have it immediately at one’s disposal. Provisionally, that should not stop us from calling it knowledge, as long as we are able to give an account of how we can distinguish this “knowledge of God” sharply from other things that we know—and from how we come to know them. In other words, we know something if we can speak about how this knowledge, obtained through a particular praxis, is singularly different.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 91.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 91.

¹⁰⁵ “We must no longer consider ‘works,’ not even the most pure or spiritual, *nor may we consider a negative work.*” Ibid., 92 (Barth’s emphasis).

¹⁰⁶ “The moment of humanity’s movement by means of God is itself beyond [the scope of] humanity, [and] can in no sense be conceived as a way, a method, a system.” Ibid., 93.

Again, the actual, praxis-mediated acknowledgment of the sovereignty of the divine subject entails the negation of all claims to be the author or source of what is thereby realized. The reader cannot hold on to the negations and affirmations of the text *and* also claim ownership of the knowledge that it mediates without falling into contradiction. This recognition of God is not something that we can “count on” (*rechnen*), so to speak.¹⁰⁷ Since we cannot occupy any subjective position required to pass judgment on the text’s affirmations, we also cannot occupy a position from which we can claim to have incorporated or integrated it into our permanent stock of accessible knowledge. That would imply a measure of autonomy in relation to the text’s affirmations that the actual content of the insight that they generate explicitly negates. We are precluded from judging that the knowledge we draw from the text’s affirmation of God’s sovereign will and acts belongs with this particular set of known facts and experience rather than that. Outside the actual encounter with the negativity within the praxis, we are not in a position to draw inferences from it or use it as a premise for developing a set of doctrines. In other words, the knowledge obtained through the reading praxis is essentially singular.

By being independent of our capacities and radically resisting being integrated as a component in our various systems of storing and using information, the acknowledgment of the free subjectivity of God resists being brought within the scope of the category of the particular. By this I mean that it cannot be understood as privileging, belonging to, or even being more compatible with a particular community, a particular culture, a particular worldview, or a particular time and space. The radical negativity involved entails that it is equally accessible—or inaccessible—to all. This is why Barth can say that “[m]ore certainty, surety, guarantee of the truth of the word of God would actually be less.”¹⁰⁸ Its singularity coincides with its universality. As Barth writes: “Every assertion of a human having, being, and enacting the divine, every alleged direct relationship with him, robs him of his divinity, draws him down to the stage of time, of things and of man: it eradicates his real significance [*beseitigt seine reale Bedeutung*]. For the reality of the divine depends on its universality.”¹⁰⁹

We can link this with a central issue addressed above. The form of knowledge we can have in faith is expressed in our positive understanding

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 93.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 95.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

of the meaning and significance of the word “God.” In “By Faith Alone” Barth, once again, argues that there is a way of using the concept “God” that undermines its meaning. We can use it in such a way that it becomes impossible to determine its actual content and legitimate use. It can then come to mean anything, rendering it all but meaningless. Barth: “Then, perhaps, quite a lot will be said using the word ‘God’, but not righteousness, not redemption, not resurrection—not the last things, not all, not the eternal.”¹¹⁰

What is different in this section as opposed to what is in the earlier section, “The Night,” is that here this negative possibility begins to be contrasted with an actual positive understanding of how the concept “God” should be used. This way of narrowing in on the legitimate use of the concept in light of what is negated and affirmed in the reading praxis gives shape to a notion of a universal, unconditional, sovereign, and free agency. It allows the reader to say something about its formal aspect. The negations bring its singularity to light. The singularity affirms its universality, while the stress on the practical aspect of the acknowledgment underscores that we are talking about an agency that is not at our disposal. It introduces the idea of a form of knowledge of a radically different order, which relativizes the knowledge that we find ourselves having of things this side of death. It is universal, and as such it undermines all our particular notions of how things stand both with this world and the next. “Thus understood,” Barth writes, “the word ‘God’ does not say just anything [*etwas*], rather it says everything: not something penultimate, but final. It is the word of judgment, the demand, the hope, which is addressed to all and has significance—in fact, definitive significance [*entscheidende Bedeutung*]—for all.”¹¹¹ The form of the concept of God thus bestows a singular meaning on it: the way that we speak about grasping and using that concept is radically different from the way we speak about grasping and using other concepts. It challenges our initial understanding of what knowledge is by presenting us with a way of knowing something that is neither a possessing nor a having and yet is universal in scope. As I suggested above, precisely in being able to make these distinctions we *do* know something.

In this section on the relationship between faith and knowledge I have written quite a bit about “knowledge.” I have written less about faith. On the knowledge front, I have argued that *Romans II* teaches us to use the

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 96.

relevant concept, “God,” in accordance with certain rules that bring its singularity to light. Thus we can distinguish a right and a wrong use and show how someone may mistakenly take themselves to have knowledge of God when, in fact, they do not. We can outline a specific praxis in which all of this may be recognized. Nonetheless, the issue of its radically singular form and use remains, and this is where the concept of “faith” is important.

In *Romans II*, the concept “faith” denotes this singular form of knowledge outlined above. It is the form of knowledge of God that is not something we possess or have. We cannot take it for granted. We cannot claim authorship. We cannot point to any quality, ability, or power that we have which generates, facilitates, or mediates the knowledge. The furthest we can go in that direction is to point to a particular praxis and series of texts, where the knowledge might present itself—ultimately, it depends solely on the free and sovereign subjectivity of God.

That said, once we engage with these texts we are faced with the claim that there is one subject who possesses actual (and thus contentful) knowledge of the free subject of God as absolutely the Other. This is precisely the person who enacts, and by enacting reveals, all of the negation mentioned in the paragraph above: the textual figure of Jesus. For Barth, faith is first and foremost the faith of Jesus. We need to return to the figure of Jesus as the Christ and ask what it is *he knows*.

Q. I have argued that we can describe how the form that our knowledge of God takes is radically different from other forms of knowledge. One definitive difference is that we find ourselves confined largely to explaining what acting in light of it looks like rather than accounting for its content in positive terms. In other words, we can give an account of what it looks like to act in such a way that the singular knowledge of God is brought to light. This is enough for us to outline a right and a wrong way of using the concept “God.”

It is the figure of Jesus as the Christ that allows us to do this. Our faith is thus faith in Jesus Christ in a very specific sense: *its content* is that Jesus grasps and realizes what we cannot grasp and realize, namely, how to act upon the knowledge of God in such a way that it can become manifest to those who have no capacity for discovering, obtaining, or maintaining it on their own. As such, our understanding as well as our faith is and remains indirect. *His death* is the “epistemological principle” [*Erkenntnisprinzip*] that provides the ultimate understanding of *our death*, insofar as his death expresses the unsublatable negativity that makes the ungraspable God

graspable to creatures like us.¹¹² By being able to draw this line of unbridgeable distinction between us and God, Jesus acts in a way that presupposes (some form of) access to a point of view or position of knowledge that only the divine subject can occupy.

I am suggesting that Barth's argument entails that the intelligibility of Jesus's revelatory suffering and death rests on his power to act on his knowledge of the relationship between our world and the divine realm, a knowledge we can attribute only to God. His *obedientia passiva* is the expression of the singular insight that this one human subject has into how things stand from the position of the divine subject, which encompasses both our creaturely realm and the beyond. As the Christ, Jesus's actions are wholly directed towards the radically transcendent and unconditioned realm of God's free subjectivity. And it is because he is a bearer of this insight into the truth and unity of God beyond the line of death that the pinnacle of his ministry is the moment when, as a human being, he becomes a purely negative entity.¹¹³

So, through his actions, the textual figure of Jesus makes the unconditioned freedom and sovereignty of the divine subject present—not directly, as a known entity, but by acting in accordance with an otherwise ungraspable and radically transcendent will that is capable of setting a limit on our power and mastery. Again, our access to its actuality is necessarily indirect, yet this is what allows us to actually think along with it rather than simply being silenced.¹¹⁴ And we should note in passing that this is where the concept of “the analogy of faith” becomes significant.

By acting in light of a perspective and knowledge that is inaccessible to creatures like us, the human being, Jesus, also gives expression to a promise of ultimate eschatological redemption and unity. Insofar as they express the confluence of human faith and divine knowledge, Jesus's actions embody the singular unity of divine and human agency. As Barth writes: “Inasmuch as time and eternity, human righteousness and divine righteousness, what is present and what is beyond is unmistakably torn asunder in Jesus, they are just as unmistakably united in him—in God.... In Jesus God is *known* as the *unknown* God.”¹¹⁵ From our (human) point of view, Jesus's path to the cross is *the* paramount example of faith

¹¹² Ibid., 149.

¹¹³ Ibid., 148.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 150.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 96f.

insofar as he is a human being who is completely oriented towards the unconditioned sovereignty of the divine subject. Moreover, Jesus's concrete faith and its realization in his path to the cross allows us to affirm that there is (some form of) unity of God and human that lies radically beyond the scope of our powers and abilities—our limit is not a limit to the freedom of God.

I have stressed that we cannot anchor the singular knowledge or insight that shapes the actions and faith of the figure of Jesus Christ in anything immanent to the world of time and creation. At this point, it is also important to stress that when we speak about *our* knowledge of God, we do so in a derived sense. As I hinted earlier, the primary meaning of the knowledge of God is that God acknowledges us as the limited creatures we are by revealing the divine subject in Christ. Barth invokes Overbeck as someone who has grasped this important aspect of Christian revelation: “It brings us less knowledge of God (where would that be?) than it assures us that God knows us.’ (Overbeck) With this death ‘*God proves his love for us.*’”¹¹⁶ The faith of Jesus bestows an eschatological apprehension of the kingdom of God in the form of a determinate knowledge of ourselves and our limitations. He does this by affording us a glimpse of an agency that can transcend such limitations and, in so doing, proves to be sovereign, unconditioned, and free. In light of that, our faith in Jesus makes possible an understanding of the actual use and significance of the concept “God.” As I quoted Barth in an earlier section: “Because [Jesus Christ] is Lord over Paul and the Romans, ‘God’ is not an empty word in the letter to the Romans.”¹¹⁷

I want to finish this discussion of the epistemic role of faith by returning to the theme of the extent of our knowledge and the justification for our various theological affirmations. At the end of “By Faith Alone” Barth writes: “Where faith is, there is the faithfulness of God.... There is forgiveness, redemption, new creation.”¹¹⁸ And he continues: “Yet, as we say this, we know that we speak of an ungraspable possibility, which itself can only be grasped again—and again—by faith [*die selbst wieder—und immer wieder—nur geglaubt werden kann*].”¹¹⁹ When we think and proclaim in light of the knowledge of God revealed in Jesus Christ, we

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 151.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 97.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 97.

acknowledge that we partially lose our grip on our words and our concepts. Not in the way that Barth criticized in “The Night,” where the concept of “God” can mean just about anything. Instead, we can trace the coordinates that outline a form of determinate agency and knowledge that is concretely known to be beyond our capacity. A somewhat useful picture is that God’s revelation makes a dent in our self-consciousness and we can trace the way the force of the impact has reshaped our thinking and our praxis. This is the sense of the metaphor of the crater that Barth uses several times in *Romans II*.¹²⁰ Here the reading and reflecting praxis gives shape to a conceptual space wherein we can let “God” be God. In this sense, the actual acknowledgment of God entails that we should resist the temptation to offer any final guarantees, since the actuality of God transcends our intentions, abilities, or actions.¹²¹

R. There is certainly more to say concerning *Romans II*, but this sketch of its main argument and structure is enough for my overall purposes. I now want to return to the main topic of this book, namely Barth the speculative theologian and his relationship to German Idealism.

I began this chapter by looking at Barth’s reading of Kant and Novalis in *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, but since then it might appear that I have lost sight of the German Idealists. That is not the case. This entire account of *Romans II* is best understood as an implicit dialogue with the account of German Idealism that I gave in the first two chapters. That does not mean that in *Romans II* Barth is a speculative theologian. He is not—at least not in a constructive sense. Still, he is a theologian working in light of the philosophical advances made by the German Idealists, which was one characteristic aspect of the speculative theology of the nineteenth century.

Romans II assumes a critical edge towards the German Idealists. The line is that their various philosophies cannot provide a starting point or a ground on which to do theology. Instead, theology must stand on its own—and in the air, as Barth insists.¹²² To some extent this is not new. The great father of liberal theology, Friedrich Schleiermacher, insisted that religion is its own entity and should be approached on its own terms.

¹²⁰ See, for example, *ibid.*, 13 and 44.

¹²¹ The crassest way to put it is to say that everything written in *Romans II* could be false. Still, within the praxis that *Romans II* outlines, this counterfactual claim is *exactly* what we should say in light of the singular and certain knowledge of faith.

¹²² Barth, *Römerbrief*, 75.

Barth's break with the theological tradition that goes back to Schleiermacher turns on how radically one should understand the argument for the singularity of theology.

Roughly, for Schleiermacher, the domain of religion pertains to a particular, if fundamental, dimension of our lives as self-conscious subjects. It covers a distinct form of goings-on in our self-consciousness and, as such, cannot be reduced to, say, ethics or metaphysics. In this sense, religion may constitute an independent domain of possible investigation. Theology as a discipline serves to give expression to an investigation into the religious aspect of self-conscious life.

In light of what Barth writes in "On Faith Alone" it is clear that he considers his approach to be radically different. Theology is precisely not an investigation into our own self-consciousness. It is a praxis centered on the reading of the biblical scriptures. The knowledge involved is explicitly outside the scope of the mastery of the self-conscious human subject. Our access to it is indirect, obtained through the *analogia fidei*—the analogy of faith. By thinking along with the texts we can draw the practical coordinates of the faith and knowledge of the figure of Jesus Christ, and this enables us to provide an account of the singular knowledge of God. So, the acknowledgment of God is not the result of turning inwards and examining some region of self-consciousness, but, rather, it is mediated through an account of the specific actions of a textual figure. Moreover, the normative power of the self-conscious human subject is explicitly negated as the reader runs through Jesus's path to the cross, the *obedientia passiva*, in thought. So, where Schleiermacher argued that theology was irreducible to other forms of investigation insofar as it concerned a distinctive region of self-consciousness, Barth argues that theology is a singular discipline precisely because it critically negates the normative power of self-consciousness within its concrete praxis. It reveals and gives expression to a form of knowledge that we can affirm only as radically external to our self-conscious lives.

Now this does not entail that Barth's theology is less concerned with the advances of the German Idealists than the theology of Schleiermacher and the tradition that he inaugurated— quite the opposite. The strength of Barth's early theology is precisely that it seeks neither to circumvent nor to modify the fundamental arguments of the German Idealists. And because he is fully aware of the far-reaching power of the Idealists' theory of self-consciousness to solve essential epistemic, ontological, and semantic problems, Barth is able to appreciate how Paul's account of God's revelation in

Jesus as the Christ outlines a praxis wherein a radically different form of knowledge than the Idealists could ever have foreseen is revealed. So, the point is not that the Idealists should have been able to account for the nature of religion or theology in a different and more appreciative way than they did in light of their own thoughts about self-consciousness. They did just fine. The point is that the revelation of God that Paul sketches in his letter emerges from outside the scope of any meaningful account that we are able to develop of the world and our place in it based on the resources available to us as creatures this side of death.

This does not mean that we are not continuously prone to manufacturing theories that exceed the bounds of sense that our mortality imposes on us. Aspects of the German Idealists' philosophies may at times transgress this limit, and thus add to the confusion surrounding the concept "God." When they did, these parts of their philosophies swerved into the realm of mythology and potential nonsense. Still, that does not detract from the genuine advances that they brought. And it reflects the strengths of the theology that Barth developed in and around *Romans II* that it is able to make original use of death as a critical principle through which we understand the legitimate extent of our possible knowledge.

S. The interesting question is not whether Barth's early theology is worked out in light of the philosophy of the German Idealists. It is—both in its understanding of the actual singularity of theology and in relation to the theological tendency that it rejects. The interesting question is whether Barth's early theology implicitly *depends* on the theory of self-consciousness that the German Idealists develop.

There is more than one way of taking that question. If the question is whether Barth's theology relies on a modern notion of self-consciousness as Schleiermacher's theology does, then the answer is plainly no. But another question is whether Barth's theology depends on the centrality of self-consciousness in modern thought to make the necessary distinctions that give expression to the singular structure of theological theory and praxis. In other words, does Barth's theology depend on what it negates? This is a much harder question to answer.

There are good reasons to give a negative answer. *Romans II* is a biblical commentary, an exposition of a two-thousand-year-old text. Even if the form of the commentary is modern in tone, it is obliged to follow the basic argumentative structure of Paul's letter, which was written long before the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

Certainly, the nineteenth-century Church historian, Franz Overbeck, plays an important role in the argument of *Romans II*, and his understanding of eschatology is crucial to how Barth approaches Paul's argument(s). But we should keep in mind that although Overbeck was a contemporary of Nietzsche, he was also a patristics scholar, who argued that his understanding of death and eschatology coincided with that of the early Church. According to Overbeck, the subsequent theological developments obscured the New Testament writers' greatest insight: that death signaled the presence of the radically unknown (God), which undermines all our ecstatic attempts at structuring our existence.

In *Romans II*, Barth repeatedly calls on the theological tradition, the protestant reformers in particular. In the preface to the second edition, Calvin's commentaries are mentioned as the paradigm of genuine exegetical work. Calvin lets Paul speak, and in such a way that the man of the sixteenth century must listen.¹²³

Finally, we could invoke Barth's acknowledgment of the surface similarities between his *Romans II* and Adolf von Harnack's book on *Marcion*.¹²⁴ Ultimately, the similarities break down. Barth rejects being labeled a Marcionite, and he explicitly argues that the God revealed in Jesus Christ is the God of the Hebrew Bible. Nonetheless, the second-century Marcion arguably seized on an important strain of Pauline thought—the idea that the God revealed in Jesus was absolutely foreign or strange [*Fremde*] from the point of view of the created world—even if he drove it *ad absurdum*.¹²⁵ Barth can be seen to argue along similar lines—even while he ends up denouncing Marcion's exegetical conclusion as a *non sequitur*.

All of these tendencies and influences suggest that we can understand Barth's argument in *Romans II* without necessarily invoking the role of the modern self-conscious subject. We can point to ways in which Barth's argument is in line with a long tradition of biblical exposition and can be understood independently of its modern philosophical context.

That said, there is nothing wrong with drawing on more contemporary sources if they help us understand the full implications of Paul's argument. Exegesis is a pragmatic discipline, and if a particular concept helps us solve

¹²³ Barth, *Römerbrief*, xvii.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, xxiv. See, for example, section 4, "Der Erlösergott als der fremde und als der obere Gott," in Adolf von Harnack, *Marcion: Das Evangelium vom Fremden Gott* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1924), 118ff.

¹²⁵ Barth, *Römerbrief*, 253.

interpretive problems or enable us to attribute greater consistency and stringency to Paul's argument, then that concept is pragmatically justified. If thinking through Paul's letter with the modern notion of self-consciousness in mind allows us to notice a new depth to the argument, then that is just wonderful. There is no *a priori* reason to insist that we cannot get a better grip on Paul's letter, if we read it alongside the texts of Kant or Hegel.

So, in a perfectly innocuous sense, Barth's reading in *Romans II* does depend on the thoughts of the German Idealists, insofar as he demonstrates how the force of Paul's argument extends beyond its narrow historical context and all the way to the present. Barth shows how we, today, can think along with Paul by exhibiting how the universal negativity of the cross of Jesus Christ is precisely that, universal. Understanding the role of the normative power of the self-conscious subject in light of this universality allows us to see how our own thinking is brought within the scope of Paul's critical argument. That modernity's absolutizing of the self-conscious subject does not escape the judgment of God adds yet another nuance to Paul's argument. By thinking along with Paul's letter, we can recognize how the modern subject is prone to exhibit a kind of forgetfulness in relation to the issue of death and gets lost in a meaningless use of the concept "God."

Barth's theology in *Romans II* thus allows us to place the philosophical advances of German Idealism in relation to the praxis of theology without significantly compromising or modifying the valuable insights of either one. (This does not mean that we cannot engage in a theological criticism of the way the German Idealists use the concept "God.") We come to understand something about the centrality of self-consciousness, underscoring the impossibility of occupying a "view from nowhere" and claiming it as a position from which to make metaphysical claims, whether they are philosophical or theological. Furthermore, we encounter a form of knowledge that reshapes our understanding of the role of self-consciousness in relation to a specific praxis—theology. We can see the contours of a theological correlate to modern thought: an independent form of praxis and theory that can operate alongside the conceptual revolution that Kant's critical philosophy inaugurated without compromising either one. It is a theology that takes the Kantian revolution in thought and its consequences seriously. Essentially, the biblical theologian follows Kant's valuable suggestion and proves that there is a God by means of the fact that he has spoken in the Bible.

T. I want to end this chapter by briefly pointing out the main internal obstacles that the early dialectical theology faces. I want to stress that this obstacle is internal to the new form of praxis and theory that Barth and Thurneysen outline. In other words, their theology generates its own internal barrier.

In *Romans II* it is obvious that the reader is supposed to have learned how to do theology differently from before. The problem is that it is very hard to put the knowledge of what is supposed to have changed forward in a familiar propositional form. We immediately run aground when we begin to construct more sophisticated theoretical versions of what we ought to be doing in light of the pan-critical negativity put forward in Paul's *Romans*. This leaves it open to others to seize on aspects of the project and claim it for themselves, but without the essential understanding of the role of negativity or subjectivity. Having burned everything to the ground, it is not at all clear how one can legitimately propose a new constructive project or even find the resources to begin one. Barth himself struggles with adopting a constructive academic position in theology.

Barth and Thurneysen were surrounded by a group of other theologians who were sympathetic to what they took to be the heart of the project. *Romans II* became a rallying point, but it remained unclear how it provided the resources for an alternative path forward. While other competing bids at the true lesson of dialectical theology developed around them, Barth and Thurneysen had to figure out in which direction they could legitimately take the movement they had begun. Barth could in principle point to his praxis and the definitive significance of the biblical scriptures, but with many other voices at work inside and outside the texts, it was not guaranteed that his companions would be gripped by the right ones.

This was made more problematic by the fact that there were philosophical or anthropological forms of thought at work in *Romans II*. Some consciously served a rhetorical or explicative purpose and could more easily be identified and left by the wayside, but some played an implicit part in the overall argument's structure and therefore were harder for the author to detect and eliminate. When Barth looks back on the earliest phase of his and Thurneysen's work his essential criticisms are that it was not sufficiently "Christological," had too strong an emphasis on eschatology, and was too much shaped by philosophical presuppositions. I think we can summarize these critiques with a formulation from Barth's text

from 1939 in *The Christian Century*, “How my mind has changed”: the underlying problem with the early theology was the “danger of falling into an abstract negation of the world.”

Now in “How my mind has changed” Barth argues that the tendency towards abstract negation was never the intention of *Romans II*. In that sense, he does not think that he made a radical shift in his approach. Instead, he suggests that the problem had to do with an inability to express his views with the necessary clarity to avoid misinterpretation or miscomprehension. Yet that difficulty, of course, follows from the overall structure of the argument in the early theology, its critique of theoretical positioning, its radical emphasis on praxis and negation. Certainly, the negation is not abstract, but tied to a specific praxis; the Church is constituted in that concrete praxis; the notion of God as a wholly Other is not philosophical, but mediated by the figure of Jesus Christ; the eschatology is not simply an abstract waiting, but a concrete encounter with the limits of human self-conscious life in death. Still, at first glance and at the level of the actual textual expression of these insights in *Romans II*, it is hard to see exactly how different the formulations would have been if the aim had, in fact, been to give expression to a more abstract negation.

In another of his later short pieces, “The Humanity of God,” Barth points out that a strong focus of the early theology was to guard against a particular form of theology, the liberal theology of the nineteenth century with which he and Thurneysen broke. The eschatological aspect and the use of terms such as “the wholly Other” can be read as if the focus is on our lack of knowledge and certainty. I want to suggest—along with Barth—that the focus of *Romans II* is actually much more on the knowledge and certainty that we do have within the praxis as well as the necessity of affirmation in light of the universal negation. Simply put, as he accepts an academic position, Barth has to change the form of his argument to be sure that the actual content of his theological insights can be understood.

Certainly, form is not independent of content and, as Hegel would put it, as the form changes the content changes as well. So as he struggles with the form, Barth is also forced to recognize the essential content of his theological breakthrough. In this sense, as a solution to the problems Barth encounters in light of his early theology, “Christology” pertains to both content and form. It underscores the concrete status of the knowledge and praxis of theology.

Here it is important to make a distinction. Barth needs to avoid the appearance that he is arguing for an abstract form of negativity or a philosophically colored notion of God as “the wholly Other.” Still, we should keep in mind that those notions are misreadings or misunderstandings of what are fundamental insights. To take the theology in a “Christological” direction does not mean that the universal and unsublatable negativity is left behind. That is precisely the challenge that Barth faces: how does one actually conceptually mediate an unsublatable and universal negativity in such a way that it can result in a concrete form of thought, one which is affirmative through and through? That is not an easy problem to solve. In the next chapter, I will show how a few crucial insights provide the tools necessary to carry out this task. This is the story of how Barth’s theology becomes speculative.

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The Form of Barth's Speculative Theology

*Ich verstehe die Trinität als das Problem der unaufhebbaren
Subjektivität Gottes in seiner Offenbarung...
K. Barth, Open letter to friends, May 18, 1924.*

By the early 1930s, Karl Barth had become a speculative theologian. Looking ahead, in this chapter I conclude the story that I have been telling. Making good on that claim will require addressing several distinct conceptual moments. Therefore, in this chapter, I will give an account of the inner structure and rationality of Barth's "mature" theology. I will argue that this structure confirms the account of early dialectical theology that I gave in the previous chapter. Here I will outline what the predicate "speculative" entails when it is used in relation to Barth's theology.

As in the previous chapter, my aim is not to proceed by means of a diachronic account of Barth's theological development. Instead, I want to look at the particular structures of Barth's arguments as they unfold in particular texts and show how they exhibit a form of theological theory and praxis that is best described as speculative. The most important text is Barth's 1931 book on Anselm of Canterbury's proof of the existence of God, the *Fides Quaerens Intellectum* or, simply, the *FQI*. I will also refer to *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, and the first volume of the *magnum opus*, the *Kirchliche Dogmatik*. A substantial part of my argument relies on Barth's use of Anselm, and, for good measure, I should

point out that there is no sharp line between my account of Barth's reading of Anselm and my own take on the first chapters of *Proslogion*.¹ In other words, I think Barth gets Anselm right and I will refer interchangeably to Anselm's argument and Barth's use of it as I proceed. Thus, I will not undertake a detailed reading of Anselm's works, but in discussing Barth's reading I will implicitly address how I understand the relationship between his argument and current tendencies in twentieth- and twenty-first-century philosophy.

The structure of the chapter will be as follows: first, I return to the German Idealists and the challenge that they present to theology. That includes recapitulating central aspects of Chaps. 3, 4, and 5. Second, I examine what Barth thinks that the Christian revelation reveals. Is there a heart of Barth's theology? Here I will draw on the first volume of the *Kirchliche Dogmatik* as well as the earlier outlines of dogmatics from 1924 to 1927. Third, I take up Barth's use of Anselm's argument in *Proslogion* 2–4 as developed in the *FQI* and show how Barth develops his speculative theology. I draw briefly on Barth's treatment of the mediating theologians in *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century* and return to the doctrine of the Trinity from *Kirchliche Dogmatik I,1*. I end the chapter with a provisional definition of Barth's speculative theology—what makes it a *speculative* theology and what makes it a speculative *theology*.

GERMAN IDEALISM IN (VERY) BRIEF

A. As mentioned, to help set the context for this chapter I will return to the essential lesson of the German Idealists. I ended my treatment of the Idealists with a reflection on Hegel's use of Christian theology and its relation to the concluding section of the *Phenomenology*, "Absolute Knowing." Here I want to reexamine some of the implications of Hegel's position.

One relatively common objection to Hegel's philosophy turns on the idea of "Absolute Knowing." In broad outlines, the objection is that we do not know an enormous number of things, so it is implausible to claim that our knowledge is absolute. This objection seems to conflate two ways in which we use the concept of knowing: knowledge as content and knowledge as form. It is obvious that we do not know many things—such

¹ Sigurd Baark, "Anselm: Platonism, Language and Truth in *Proslogion*," *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 63, No. 4: 379–97.

as how sperm whales spend most of their time or whether there is life somewhere else in the galaxy. Yet this is a matter of the particular *content* of our knowledge. Whether we know what knowledge is, is another issue. That concerns the *form* of knowledge. Hegel's "Absolute Knowing" pertains to the form of knowledge. Absolute knowing means that we know what the form of knowledge is, or, differently, we know what it is to know.

Regarding the form of knowledge, one might invoke a concern about the way our apparent knowledge is bound up with our subjectivity. If we define knowledge as what is objective, and define objectivity as being independent of our subjective form of perceiving or understanding, then any involvement of our subjectivity will undermine the objective status of the knowledge we appear to have. As we have seen, both Kant and Hegel are united in rejecting this line of argument. Subjectivity does not stand opposed to objectivity but is the precondition for being able to conceive of something as objective. Kant and Hegel diverge, however, on the question whether this entails that we have grasped the absolute form of knowing.

Kant thinks that there are fundamental issues pertaining to the very structure of our form of knowledge that we have yet to understand completely. The most important of these is the true nature of the relationship between freedom and causality, spontaneity and receptivity. Without understanding this, we cannot claim to be certain that our apparent knowledge leaves no room for doubt about its ultimate veracity. The issue is too closely intertwined with the form of our cognitive capacities. We have to limit ourselves to saying that, for all we know, things seem to be going the right way—even if the full-blooded form of actual knowledge might prove to differ from our familiar way of cognizing.

A significant aspect of Hegel's response is to point out that the consequences of claiming that our form of knowledge leaves room for doubt are intolerable. For example, not knowing the form of knowledge would entail that we are actually unable to distinguish between things we know and things we do not know. The concept of knowledge would cease to make sense. If we want to avoid this conclusion, we must operate by recognizing the form of knowledge in praxis—even if we have not fully conceptually articulated it. The epistemological task is thus discovering what we already implicitly know and practice, and making it explicit. Here we return to the issue of the involvement of subjectivity. As Hegel writes: "[E]verything turns on grasping and expressing the True, not only as

Substance, but equally as *Subject*.”² In other words, the aim is to give an account of the involvement of subjectivity, which ceases to be a barrier to giving an actual account of the absolute form of knowledge, instead being revealed as an essential element that guarantees that knowledge as a concept can as much as make sense. Although, as anyone who has read the *Phenomenology of Spirit* will know, to demonstrate this is no easy task.

In Chap. 3, I showed how Hegel disarms the remnants of skepticism in Kant by bringing reason and freedom within the scope of our immediate engagement with the world in a particular way. Here I want to emphasize that Hegel’s account of “Absolute Knowing” determines the relationship between knowledge, time, and progress in a certain way. If the form of knowing is certain, then the idea of a (yet more) perfect form of knowledge to come is misguided. The list of things that we will know might increase indefinitely, but that does not change the essential form through which we come to know them. That form involves our self-conscious subjectivity. There is no need to aim for a reconciliation of freedom and nature, since they do not contradict each other as such.³ Simply put, conceiving the form of knowledge as a totality to which we are moving, but have not yet reached, is problematic. It entails that we do not yet know what knowledge is, which again makes the very concept of knowledge impossible to apply. If we take the idea of the totality of knowledge to apply to the full list of knowable content, it will seem banal at best. Moreover, it raises the question whether a particular account of the form of knowing would be included as itself a knowable content. Either way, it is difficult to make any straightforward sense of the idea of knowledge as a comprehensive “totality.”

One consequence of these considerations is that we can no longer include the *form of knowledge* as part of the idea of an unfinished teleology. Human progress has now to be construed as proceeding with no fundamental epistemological obstacles to be overcome. There is merely an indefinite series of particular insights available to be grasped. Furthermore, our self-conscious subjectivity is an irreducible part of whatever state of

²G. W. F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1988), 14; *Phenomenology of Spirit*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 10.

³For example, the Kantian (quasi-)eschatological “rational belief” in the *summum bonum* as a state under which freedom reigns through rationally determined laws that fulfill the final purpose of nature seems superfluous. From a Hegelian point of view, if we strike “final purpose,” such a state is simply present—which does not mean that the present social order cannot be improved.

increased knowledge may come about. This is important for me to stress, because it is an essential aspect of what “speculative thought” means for Hegel. Our thinking is speculative as opposed to dialectical once we have left a particular notion of epistemic progress behind. Speculative thinking is the form of knowledge realized.

Now I will argue that the same idea applies to Barth's theology and that the book on Anselm of Canterbury makes this aspect of his thinking explicit. There is a way in which the *form* of theological knowledge is certain, and that changes how we should consider the structure and aim of the theological praxis. This does not mean that Barth simply adopts the Hegelian model of speculative thought. Much of the criticism developed in *Romans II* still stands. Yet he leaves behind a particular theological temptation to use an unrealized eschatology as an epistemological model. We could, perhaps, say that the form dogmatic theology takes is realized eschatological knowledge, rather than a more-or-less qualified hypothesis that must await some future date for its correctness to be determined. As with Hegelian speculative knowing, what is for Barth a theology of revelation is characterized by its form of certainty. This certainty is an essential component of what allows us to call it “speculative.”

This argument is abstract, but I will spend the rest of the chapter making it concrete and showing how the form of Barth's mature theology merits the predicate “speculative” in such a way that we can notice a resemblance to the Hegelian project. I want to anticipate one aspect of that argument and briefly engage with an issue that I did not address in Chap. 4 but which is central to seeing how the book on Anselm and the theology that follows releases a particular engagement with philosophy that appears unsustainable. This might seem redundant, since it could sound as though I am repeating the end of the previous chapter. There I had just written about Barth and brought in Hegel as an expression of the culmination of German Idealism. Now I have just recounted a key aspect of Hegel's thinking and turn to Barth. This change of order results in a productive shift of emphasis, which I will exploit to frame the reconceptualization that takes place in Barth's theology.

B. Above, I wrote that, according to Hegel, self-conscious subjectivity “...ceases to be a barrier to giving an actual account of the absolute form of knowledge, instead being revealed as an essential part of what guarantees that knowledge as a concept can as much as make sense.” In Chap. 5, I argued that an essential part of Barth's early work was to outline a form of theological knowledge (*Erkenntnis*) that undermines the

normative sovereignty that defines the role of the self-conscious subject in the philosophy of the German Idealists. Before proceeding, however, we need to examine whether these two claims contradict each other.

The question is whether we can still speak of actual knowledge if self-consciousness is not involved as Hegel conceives it to be. In Chap. 5, I argued that we can speak of knowledge in light of what Barth discovers in *Romans II*. Our knowledge of God is indirect and mediated by the praxis. The praxis makes it possible to recognize what actually possessing the relevant knowledge of God looks like, as the figure of Jesus Christ acts on knowledge of the will of God. Yet we, engaged readers of the text, recognize this knowledge as expressed in the negation of a form of knowing, where our self-conscious subjectivity is absolutely normative and autonomous. This marks it as knowledge of another order.

The knowledge we receive from revelation is the result of an encounter with a limit to (or limitation of) our form of knowing. Although I use the term “limit,” it is important to note that it is not a limitation understood as an inherent deficiency. It is not that we ought to be able to know something beyond this limit and find ourselves unable to do so. If anything, our (potential) deficiency is expressed in a lack of recognition of this limitation. So far, so good.

Now for Hegel, self-consciousness constitutes knowing in at least two ways. First, self-consciousness entails the possibility of “subtracting” oneself. When I come to know something (object or state of affairs), I conceive it as being as it is, in the form I encounter, whether I am there to observe it or not. In other words, self-consciousness enables me to conceive the object of my thought or perception as objective and independent of my way of thinking and perceiving it. Second, self-consciousness entails being able to determine whether, at a given moment, my prior concept or my present perception should serve as the norm for what is the correct thing to think, argue, or do. We can understand what is involved here in both a moderate and a strong sense. The moderate sense involves the ability to exhibit some minimal form of (conceptual) spontaneity in relation to any given state of affairs. We revise our prior understanding, perhaps use a slightly altered concept, and learn something new. The strong sense emerges when we realize that this seems to presuppose a more far-reaching ability to abstract from the actuality of whatever is given to us and freely determine its overall value or relevance. We are able to do this in relation to our approach to our existence as such. When we entertain thoughts and judgments of this kind, we exhibit a form of autonomy that is radically

independent of what is given to us in thought or perception. It rests on the self-relating negativity of self-consciousness itself; that form of consciousness is for itself its concept, as Hegel puts it. This is the reverse side of the ability to subtract oneself.

In the theology of *Romans II*, Barth argues that the theological praxis and the way it involves the negativity of death entails that the strong reading of our power of normative judgment ceases to be an option with regard to a particular domain: Paul's text and its affirmations of the sovereign freedom of God. This does not affect our ability to "subtract" our own subjective perspective from the equation (that straightforwardly follows from the idea of death and mortality) or our ability to critically revise our own judgments and concepts. The negativity encountered and revealed in Jesus's death on the cross as the Christ means that our normative judgments can have no bearing on the value, relevance, or truth of the ungraspable Other—God—revealed in the biblical texts. It is precisely when we try to judge the "object" of *Romans II* in light of our (implicit or explicit) normative standards that we run into problems. In other words, aspects of self-consciousness that involve critiquing our own subjective position can still operate. The aspect of self-consciousness that involves critiquing the "object" of our theological reflections is brought to a halt.

While self-consciousness as such essentially involves autonomy and spontaneity in the strong sense, there is no reason we cannot say that it could be prevented from being actualized in a particular instance and is thus limited. The issue is whether this would *essentially* negate the autonomy or spontaneity of self-consciousness. In other words, would such a limitation do violence to one of our essential capacities as self-conscious subjects, so that we must choose between a satisfactory account of self-consciousness and a theology that can make sense?

First, that something essentially depends on a particular capacity does not entail that the capacity must always be in operation. Even if a certain capacity is essential to a particular entity's being what it is, this does not entail that the capacity cannot be blocked in certain conditions or circumstances. Nonetheless, its being blocked is not desirable. From the point of view of a theory of self-consciousness, an external obstacle that prevents an essential capacity from being exercised fully ought to be changed or removed. In other words, while there is no explicit contradiction between the Hegelian account of self-consciousness and what Barth discovers in *Romans II*, the relationship as conceived remains deeply unsatisfying.

The interaction between revelation and self-consciousness seems brutal, as it resembles an assault on essential human faculties.

Now if there were something inherent in the capacity itself that would make it give way on its own accord, it would no longer be a question of doing violence to our self-conscious nature. It is important to keep in mind that the capacity to take a step back from what is given and subject it to normative judgment is essentially the capacity to reason. If invoking our absolute normative sovereignty in the domain of theology turns out to be unreasonable (for example, by resulting in a logical contradiction) then it ceases to be a legitimate exercise of the essential capacity to reason. Instead, its absolute affirmation would contradict the final end of the capacity itself. If it is reasonable to give way, self-consciousness in a full and autonomous sense can be still affirmed—even as it is brought to recognize (of itself) that it has no jurisdiction in a particular domain. The *FQI* shows us how Barth discovers an argument along these lines in Anselm's theology and in *Proslogion* 2–4 in particular. Here, too, we can recognize an implicit rapprochement between Barth's theology and German Idealism—in a way that preserves the crucial distinction. Having invoked the distinction between the two practices, I return to the shape and structure of Barth's theology.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF DOCTRINE

A. Certainly, theology as a praxis differs from philosophy. As we have seen, this is not because it cares less about rigorous and critical reflection, but because of its concrete subject matter: the reading and proclamation of the teachings of the biblical texts in the community of the Church. As Kant cheerfully pointed out: the praxis of biblical theology does not concern the discipline of philosophy one bit.

Now biblical theology entails that the primary source of theological insights is the biblical texts. As I have argued, engaging in biblical theology entails having one's thinking shaped in a particular way, and we can talk about the way this praxis shapes our thoughts and intentions. Once we do, we engage in an alternative form of biblical theology: we engage in second-order reflection on what we have read and affirmed in light of the texts. Here we begin to enter the realm of biblical theology as dogmatic or doctrinal theology.

The aim of dogmatic theology is to determine what the Church ought to teach based on its reading of the biblical texts to proclaim their message. As implied in the previous paragraph, the first step towards engaging in

this “dogmatic theology” is understanding how one gets from the texts to the teaching. This is the doctrine of Scripture, or the *Schriftsprinzip*, as Barth refers to it. It is important to note that this is, in fact, part of dogmatic theology. It is a piece of theory.

In the very beginning of the text, “The Principle of Scripture in the Reformed Church,” from 1925, Barth immediately issues a warning: “In the service of clarity, I will immediately say that what I would like to address here is a chapter in *Dogmatics*. Dogmatics is not proclamation, not meditation, not biblical exposition. It is certainly also ‘Life’, although—let us immediately say the fatal word: this part of Life is ‘Teaching.’ All the unfriendly thoughts that present themselves when one speaks of ‘theory’ over and against ‘praxis’ apply even more to Dogmatics than all other ‘theories.’ Yet one ought not to be ashamed of it, as little as one should be ashamed of the Gospel. It is the work of the self-contemplation of the Church concerning that ... which ought to represent its proclamation.”⁴ Although the theory–praxis distinction remains suspect, self-conscious reflection on the Church’s proclamation is an inherent aspect of the Church’s praxis. In other words, the Church’s praxis necessarily entails “theory” in the form of “teachings.”

Already in the text “Reformed Teaching, its Essence and Task” from 1923, Barth argued that the recognition [*Erkenntnis*] that the truth is strictly contained in the Word of God while the Word of God is strictly contained in the Old and New Testament writings was the primary insight of the Reformed Church. All teaching of the truth of the Word of God must acknowledge the [biblical] text as its immutable and unbreakable rule or norm.⁵ And as we have seen, the text’s affirmations and arguments set a limit to a particular form of normative autonomy. Yet, we find a slight shift of emphasis in Barth’s approach already a year after the publication of *Romans II*: “Doctrina is the Christian word of man, which has passed through the *Krisis*, the merciless purification and cleansing of the Word of God attested in Scripture.”⁶ Barth now argues that once we have passed through the concrete and practical acknowledgment of the unsublatable negativity that we encounter when we want to give expression to God’s revelation, the contours of a form of affirmative, second-order reflections begin to take shape.

⁴Karl Barth, *Gesamtausgabe – Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1922–25*, (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1990), 502ff.

⁵Ibid., 223.

⁶Ibid.

Initially, these “teachings” or doctrines are not attempts at constructing permanent or stable theoretical entities. They serve as provisional, guiding expressions of insight and knowledge. The certitude and knowledge to which they give expression remains primarily practical. They capture a particular moment in the development of theology, a particular situation in which concrete circumstances require us to reflect on the “direction” of the Christian proclamation. Barth: “*We, here, now*—confess *this* (as certain [while] conscious, in the name of the *Una Sancta*, conscious of speaking the truth, yet: *We, here, now, this*).”⁷

I want to dwell on this notion of the impermanence of Christian doctrine. As we saw with *Romans II*, in accordance with the “subject-matter” itself the theologian cannot have the ground of these insights and reflections readily available outside of the critical praxis that threatens to undermine the theological constructs at any given moment. Rather, the engaged theologian *conceives* their actual ground as emerging from within the actual praxis in the form of an unoblitable negativity that strictly excludes certain conceptual moves and necessitates others. In *Romans II*, Barth emphasizes the negative or critical aspect of the praxis. In the period immediately following *Romans II*, the emphasis begins to shift ever so slightly towards the affirmative aspect of the texts. Barth had already forcefully argued that affirmation and negation were two sides of the same coin, but as he moves into the territory of dogmatic theology, he begins to suggest that the negation follows from a more fundamental affirmation. The negativity is an *a posteriori* means of expressing the unconditional nature of the affirmation of God.

Thus, in his discussion of the Reformed understanding of the role of Scripture, Barth writes: “This ground grounds itself; the Spirit is only known through the Spirit; God is only known through God.”⁸ In other words, the rules for conceiving and affirming God’s revelation as expressed and recognized in the biblical scriptures emerge *sui generis*. Barth therefore argues that when we engage in second-order reflection on the structure of our insights derived from the reading, our receptive knowledge initially takes the form of an encounter with an intentional agency. Further, this agency makes itself known without in any way relinquishing the definitive sovereignty of its acts. In other words, even the receptive aspect of revelation is not “ours.” As Barth writes: “In the case of God there is

⁷Ibid., 616.

⁸Ibid., 225.

no 'Why?' What he wants and speaks and accomplishes has the ground of its reality *and* the ground of its recognition [*seinen Realgrund und seinen Erkenntnisgrund*] *only* in him ... God is not only himself and alone the truth, he himself alone also *reveals* that he is the truth."⁹ We conceive the form of our knowledge as shaped by a free and sovereign subjectivity, which remains utterly unbound and unconditioned by our particular reception. The negativity that confronts us in God's revelation is part of this conceptual form.

We can also state this more positively by saying that revelation in the biblical scriptures is and remains God's self-affirmation. As such, it is expressible *primarily* in our unconditional affirmation of its actuality—which *subsequently* includes a particular form of negation, when we seek to articulate how it concretely structures our thinking. In other words, the entire unfolding of revelation—God's speech—is conceivable only as a free act of God, and this includes acknowledging initiative, medium, and reception or acknowledgment as sovereign, divine acts. The realization of all three aspects of revelation depends on God's freedom to act. This is Barth's paramount insight, when he writes in a letter sent to his closest associates on May 18, 1924: "I understand the Trinity as the problem of *the unsublatable Subjectivity of God in his revelation...*" It is interesting that Barth feels entitled to use the notion of "subjectivity" to refer to God. In *Romans II*, the term is used primarily to denote the human subject, but as the affirmative aspect of revelation begins to carry more weight, God's subjectivity takes on a decidedly positive, elucidating role. The Trinity is the conceptual form that the free and sovereign subjectivity of God takes in our thinking based on the affirmations we encounter in the biblical scriptures. In this sense, it is a piece of theory, a "doctrine," whose conceptual rules come to replace the function of the structuring negativity that we have encountered as reflective readers of, say, Paul's Romans.

B. We see both the affirmative and negative aspects of this insight articulated in the preliminary remarks of Barth's chapter on the Trinity of God in the *Göttingen Dogmatics*: "The content of revelation is God *himself*? What I mean is that it is not an enlightenment of reason or the actualization of a religious disposition. Both these take place where revelation takes place. In face of what God does we do something corresponding, parallel, and analogous in our own sphere of existence. More strongly or more weakly our rational activity receives a specific theoretical and practical

⁹Ibid., 225.

orientation.”¹⁰ God’s self-affirmation in revelation cannot be reduced to the form of our rationality or to our various human dispositions, religious or otherwise. We can understand Barth’s talk of reason’s relation to revelation as an extension of the argument that the possibility of thinking along in light of a structuring negation follows from the unconditional form of the affirmation. The acknowledgment of the negativity is the way we can orient ourselves theoretically or practically in light of God’s revelation of God’s self. It is the conceptually analogous or parallel movement, which corresponds to the divine act by making room for God’s self-affirmation in the human sphere of existence. If this is right, it signals the beginning of Barth’s profound insight that the theological use of reason and the analogy of faith are the same form of activity: tracing the acts of God in thought. I will return to this issue later. For now, I want to look more closely at the role that the dogma of the Trinity plays in Barth’s theology from the *Göttingen Dogmatik* to *Kirchliche Dogmatik I,1*.

C. In the *Göttingen Dogmatik*, the concept of “subjectivity” applies primarily to God, but—in a sense—we could also say that the term “God” denotes the unconditioned and unsublatable subjectivity that Jesus reveals as the Christ. This semantic dialectic signals that when we speak of God we are speaking of something that we absolutely could not tell ourselves. Barth writes: “Not as though Jesus subsequently gave and affixed the name of Father to the known Creator of all things, to the Unconditioned, to the limit and critical negation of everything given, to the origin, to him who is self-existent. No, Jesus reveals the Father for the first time. He shows the Father, and with him all that the Father is and does.”¹¹

We do not begin with the genus “God” and then realize that the particular “God” that we are talking about in the Christian tradition belongs to the species “Triune,” which may or may not include other (Babylonian or South Asian) divinities. Revelation means that we now, for the first time, come to understand how to use the concept “God” correctly. “God” is *this* singular, free, and sovereign subjectivity, revealed as Lord in the biblical scriptures.¹² An important function of the doctrine of the Trinity

¹⁰ Karl Barth, *The Göttingen Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans, 1991), 94.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 112ff.

¹² “It is *this* God who in his revelation is never revealed object except as revealing subject: the God who reveals himself as Father, in the Father as the Son, and in the Father and the Son as the Spirit. It is *this* God who in his inexhaustible vitality, that is, in his indestructible subjectivity, makes superfluous and meaningless the question whether there is some special content of revelation alongside the fact that it is *his* revelation.” *Ibid.*, 95ff.

is to provide a set of rules that determine the possible meaningful uses of the word “God” (to develop the critical insight that it is no longer an empty word, as Barth wrote in *Romans II*). It allows us to know what we are talking about when we do theology, which is why it occupies a special place. Barth writes: “[T]he formula seems to be pointing us to something strangely outside or beyond as the a priori of all dogmas. Obviously, its discussion is to be viewed as a *prolegomenon par excellence*.”¹³ The formula gives expression to the basic coordinates of a conceptual space that enable us to begin to engage in second-order theological discourse. We therefore find Barth using almost the exact same formulation that I quoted earlier: “The problem of the doctrine of the Trinity is the recognition of the inexhaustible vitality or the indestructible subjectivity of God [*unerschöpflichen Lebendigkeit oder der unaufhebbaren Subjektivität Gottes*] in his revelation.”¹⁴

Although the function of the doctrine of the Trinity is to provide the most basic coordinates or rules for engaging in an affirmative dogmatic theology, we are mistaken if we think of it as an axiom or a brute postulate that we must accept to get going. The doctrine is not simply given, but is itself an expression of “theological thinking” and, in this sense, is not its presupposition. We can say that it is *the* presupposition for thinking through and constructing a dogmatic insofar as it makes the “rationality” of God’s revelation explicit. Nonetheless, if we are asking when we will hit rock bottom and it ceases to make sense to look for a deeper ground, we must point to the praxis of reading and re-reading the biblical texts.

D. The doctrine springs out of the attempt to understand what is at stake in the biblical text’s account of the figure of Jesus Christ. In the *Göttingen Dogmatic* (as in *Romans II* three years earlier), to understand the figure of Jesus as the Christ is to see how he intends, acts on, and thus manifests knowledge of a radically different order. Barth writes:

The one who here sees cause to cry ‘Abba, Father,’ if he understands himself aright, must have in mind first and especially one who stands somewhere else, who lives and moves differently, who is totally different from himself. The death of Jesus, his death on the cross, is the place where his lordship is recognized incomparably far above this final place. It is from the frontiers of humanity that the word goes forth whose messenger Jesus is. Its author can-

¹³ Ibid., 98.

¹⁴ Ibid.

not be one who is himself in contradiction or in question. *He* knows that which marks our being only as something transcended—the opposing second thing, which conditions and limits. The Father to whom Jesus points is free where we are bound. The kingdom that is proclaimed here is worlds above the insuperable conflict in which we languish. To repent in Jesus’ sense is to turn around, *metanoein*, to direct our thoughts to where the conflict in which, with our human existence, we constantly move in our human acts, is *not yet* or *no longer*.¹⁵

Even though we cannot claim to possess such knowledge ourselves, we can recognize that the knowledge on which Jesus acts belongs to an agency that operates beyond the limits, frontiers, or conflicts that determine human existence. By operating “beyond” I do not mean operating indifferently to these limits or conflicts, but rather not having one’s actions being determined or conditioned by them. The affirmation of God’s unity encompasses and sublates the contradictions that we encounter as creatures. This radical affirmation of God’s unity and freedom is God’s transcendence properly understood. Concerning this connection between Jesus as revealer and the one revealed, Barth writes: “... [W]ho can reveal God but God himself? He who does this (and it is our presupposition that Christ does it) must himself be God. Precisely not an elevated man! Precisely not an intermediate being descending from above! God himself, or, to emphasize our second formula, *wholly* God. Only God in totality, with no subtraction or diminution, with no ‘more or less,’ with no ‘almost,’ can reveal the Father.”¹⁶

This form of knowing includes the recognition that we cannot “go beyond” the doctrine of the Trinity. The formula provides a positive notion of a limit to our conceptual capacities when confronted with the subject of revelation. Just as the negativity revealed in the judgment of Jesus as the Christ sets an unoblatable limit to the authority of our conceptual autonomy, so acknowledging God’s subjective sovereignty in all three modes of revelation (as Barth later puts it: “revealed, revealer, and revealedness”) signals that we cannot penetrate or circumvent the self-affirmation of the divine subject. In other words, God cannot be conceived as an object available to be *comprehended* by our power to know.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 111ff.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 117.

E. We can see how the function and use of reason in theology cannot be separated from the doctrine of the Trinity. This insight slowly develops through Barth's subsequent revisions of the dogmatic prolegomena. In *Die Christliche Dogmatik im Entwurf* from 1927, we find much the same approach to the role of the doctrine of the Trinity. The distinction between our capacities as self-conscious subjects and the unconditioned and free subjectivity of God allows us to draw the crucial distinction between how we conceive God and how we conceive everything else. Barth writes: "God is and remains Subject in his Word. His thoughts are not our thoughts, nor do they become so. God is not and does not become another object than [he] himself [is], not even in his Word. It is the wonder of revelation, the Trinity, the becoming flesh of the Word and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, that it is so; that the one who is and remains subject communicates himself to humanity."¹⁷ The form of being a subject conceived in the doctrine of the Trinity is the way God communicates God's self to us—it is how God enters the sphere of human discourse. The crucial difference between God and us, when we enter the realm of discursive exchange, is that when we so engage with the world, we forfeit absolute mastery over our actions and words. Once executed, they are available to be judged and evaluated by norms and standards that apply independently of our command and control. Barth's essential argument is that this is not the case when the God of the Bible acts and speaks. God remains Lord in all God's acts, and we—the witnesses to those acts—cannot invoke norms that are foreign to God's revelation to determine the value or correctness of those acts. If we try, we place ourselves radically outside the praxis where actual knowledge of God can be obtained.

We could also say that the doctrine of the Trinity is a way of conceptually mediating the radical and unconditional unity of God in all God's acts—an actual unity that reveals the implicit contradictions that our discursive existence confronts and even may generate. As Barth writes: "The doctrine of the Triunity of God is not simply the suspension or simply the questioning [*nicht nur keine Aufhebung oder auch nur Infragestellung*], but rather much more the confirmation and underscoring of the thought of the strict and absolute *Unity* of God."¹⁸ This thought—the unconditional affirmation of the freedom and unity of the divine subject—practically shapes the form of our reasoning and allows

¹⁷Karl Barth, *Die Christliche Dogmatik im Entwurf* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1982), 90.

¹⁸Ibid., 204.

us to conceive the divine subjectivity *and* our own limitation in the same thought. With it, we engage in a form of thinking that is determined by a unity, which remains outside our positive grasp. This allows the theologian a certain amount of freedom to experiment with various affirmations derived from the reading praxis that might not immediately be consistent with each other. It does not entail that our thinking is arbitrary, but rather implies that fidelity to the grounding praxis is the goal, and absolute theoretical unity and consistency is not.

Thus in the section *The concrete significance of the doctrine of the Trinity* Barth captures the essence of the insight that has accompanied him since 1924: “Its significance however consists in binding human thinking, judged by God, to God as God truly is; that, in the most rigorous way, it prevents human thought from the human possibility to only apparently speak of God, to miss God, to think beyond God ... It presents us with God in such a way that it is certain that, if we think of him at all, he can only be the Lord of our thoughts. We cannot master him. We cannot get behind him. We cannot grasp him; we can only recognize ourselves as grasped by him.”¹⁹ The Trinity as the affirmative conceptual form of the God whom Jesus reveals as Lord on the cross captures our thought and guides it in a certain way by precluding our circumventing or objectifying it. We cannot conceive of a position from which we could subject it to our own judgments and criteria; we cannot conceive of what it would mean to assert some measure, norm, or concept that could determine, condition, or comprehend the form of free and sovereign agency that belongs to the divine subject. This is the heart of Barth’s argument.

There is a way in which God *qua* God’s unconditional unity is utterly inscrutable—precisely in God’s self-affirmation and self-communication. Full revelation of the divine subject entails recognizing our own inherent limitations and incapacity to comprehend God. Although there are problems with this way of putting it, one could say that the best way for God to guarantee that we come to recognize how little we can comprehend God is fully to reveal God as the one God is.²⁰

¹⁹ Barth continues: “This is only assured, when God lets humanity think about him, of him, as he is: as a ‘Thou,’ as being placed over and against an indissoluble Subject; as a ‘Thou,’ from whom it is in no way possible to abstract, behind whom there stands no entity, no idea, and from which no effects follow that differ from this ‘Thou,’ this divine Thou by whom the human I is addressed as by his Lord.” *Ibid.*, 231ff.

²⁰ As such, the unsublatable subjectivity of God exemplified in the doctrine of the Trinity provides a model for understanding the unconditional self-affirmation at work in the doctrine of the incarnation. *Ibid.*, 297.

F. Barth's thinking about the doctrine of the Trinity is remarkably consistent. Perhaps it is not surprising that it remains largely unchanged from 1924 to 1927. That is, after all, a span of only three years. Nevertheless, the same arguments appear in 1932 in the *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, when Barth's theological prolegomena has assumed its definitive form.

In the first volume of the *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, the priority of praxis, the texts, and the structuring role of the doctrine of the Trinity is accented as Barth carried out a significant redaction. The sections in the earlier *Prolegomena*, whose headings explicitly invoke the role of the human subject, disappear. Apparently, Barth judged that it was unnecessary to invoke anthropological or existential considerations to explicate the conditions of theology. I will return to this below.

In the *Kirchliche Dogmatik I,1*, the norm of all theological claims remains the Word of God as witnessed in the biblical scriptures. The aim of theology is the praxis of proclamation or preaching of the Word of God to the world. Thus, theology is essentially the praxis of reading and rereading the biblical scriptures in light of this obligation to think through and organize the knowledge that we obtain there and concretely determine how best to live up to the overarching task of proclaiming in accordance with this knowledge. Scripture presents us with the concept of revelation, and revelation "... must simply [*schlechterdings*] be understood in its singularity. That is, it must simply be understood in light of its subject, in light of God [*von ihrem Subjekt, von Gott her verstanden sein*]." ²¹ This is why the first (practical) matter to be settled is outlining the meaningful use of the word "God."

Once we think along with the biblical texts, the question of the identity of the self-revealing God is inseparable from the question of how revelation comes about, and from the question of its result. ²² The Bible answers these three questions thusly: "God is revealed. He reveals himself through himself. He reveals himself." ²³ From this it follows that "... [i]f we actually want to understand revelation in terms of its subject, in terms of God, then we must first of all understand that this subject, God, the revealer, is identical with his act of revelation and also identical with its effects." ²⁴

²¹ Karl Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik* (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1935), 311.

²² *Ibid.*, 311ff.

²³ *Ibid.*, 312.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 312.

Again, we see how Barth underscores the confluence of this unconditional affirmation of the unity of God in God's revelation and the negation of our absolute, conceptual autonomy, which follows. The singular form of the unconditional affirmation entails that we encounter a set of negations that shape how we are able to conceive of both God and ourselves. I quote Barth at some length:

According to Holy Scripture God's revelation is a ground which has no higher or deeper ground above or below it but is an absolute ground in itself, and therefore for man a court [*Inстанz*] from which there can be no possible appeal to a higher court [*Inстанz*]. Its reality and its truth do not rest on a superior reality and truth. They do not have to be actualized or validated as reality from this or any other point. They are not measured by the reality and truth found at this other point. They are not to be compared with any such nor judged and understood as reality and truth by reference to such. On the contrary, God's revelation has its reality and truth wholly and in every respect—both ontically and noetically—within itself. Only if one denies it can one ascribe to it another higher or deeper ground or try to understand and accept or reject it from the standpoint of this higher or deeper ground. Obviously even the acceptance of revelation from the standpoint of this different and supposedly higher ground, e.g., an acceptance of revelation in which man first sets his own conscience over it as judge, can only entail the denial of revelation.²⁵

This is a remarkable passage. Having begun my reading of Barth with his 1917 lecture, *The New World in the Bible*, I find it striking how consistent this line of argument is throughout Barth's early to mid-period writings. If anything merits the title of "the heart of Barth's theology," it is this understanding of how the biblical text, and, more specifically, the subject of whom the text speaks, negates and thus shapes our thinking in definitive ways. We can trace a direct line from the argument that the history of God as told in the Bible precludes the question "Why?" (*Warum?*) to the above claim that "God's revelation is a ground which has no higher or deeper ground above or below it but is an absolute ground in itself, and therefore for man a court from which there can be no possible appeal to a higher court." Once this line of argument stands out clearly as the *de facto* center of Barth's theology throughout the fifteen years from 1917 to 1932, the question of the changes he makes to his theological approach comes to the fore.

²⁵ Ibid., 321. *Church Dogmatics* (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 305.

At a very general level, we have seen that the emphasis shifts as he begins to lecture on Christian doctrine. The unconditional affirmation of God's freedom and sovereignty takes on the primacy that the critical negation had in *Romans II*. Concretely, we progress from an unsublatable negation to an unsublatable subjectivity. We begin to see how the biblical language increasingly becomes a vehicle for affirmations without losing the critical aspect that was so important in *Romans II*. Our thoughts still give way, but we are left not with a void or vacuum; instead we have particular, significant formulations derived from the way revelation structures our language and thought. These formulations derived from, or constructed out of, the biblical vocabulary allow us to analyze the form and content of God's revelation. As Barth writes: "... [T]he statement or statements about God's Trinity cannot claim to be directly identical with the statement about revelation or with revelation itself. The doctrine of the Trinity is an analysis of this statement, i.e. of what it denotes."²⁶ This does not mean that these second-order concepts are arbitrary, but rather that they follow the inner rationality of revelation, serve as a "necessary and appropriate analysis of revelation," and can thus be affirmed as how "revelation itself is correctly interpreted by the dogma."²⁷ They exhibit a particular conceptual necessity, quieting the nervousness we might feel on recognizing them as *our* conceptual constructs. Of course they are ours, but their inner formal necessity makes that a secondary issue. The point of stressing their "creaturely origin" is to signal that they are inherently open to improvement and positive revision—it does not entail that they are open to be abandoned. Without question, theology as a part of the Church can always be improved, but it cannot be abandoned. Most certainly we cannot leave behind the doctrines that are developed in the prolegomena, such as the Trinity or the Incarnation, since they function as the most basic concepts (*grundlegende Begriff*) that make the singularity of revelation explicit and exhibit the structural necessity of theological thought.²⁸

FIDES QUÆRENS INTELLECTUM

I am about to leave the *Kirchliche Dogmatik* behind and turn to the book that occupies the center of this chapter and my overall argument concerning Barth's speculative theology, the *Fides Quaerens Intellectum* from 1931.

²⁶ Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, 325; *Church Dogmatics*, 308.

²⁷ Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, 326ff; *Church Dogmatics*, 310.

²⁸ Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, 400; *Church Dogmatics*, 379.

I turn my focus from Barth's dogmatic reflections on the Trinity as the unsublatable subjectivity of God, shaping the concepts and rules essential for thinking through God's revelation, to Barth's reflections on what he calls the "name of God" in Anselm of Canterbury's theology, explicating how faith seeks understanding. That is, I turn from the One whose "... being as subject is guaranteed by the knowledge of the ultimate reality of the three modes of being in the essence of God above and behind which there is nothing higher" to Anselm's "*id quo maius cogitari nequit*"—that above which nothing greater can be conceived.

I have invoked the notions of reason and rationality, conceptual mediation and structural necessity. I have claimed it is essential to the doctrine of the Trinity to make the rationality of the theology of revelation explicit and show that it serves to guide and shape our theological thinking. I have outlined this argument very broadly by indicating how a particular form of negativity follows from the form and content of the doctrine and roughly determines what claims or concepts may be included in or excluded from dogmatic theology. Yet, more needs to be said to fully justify the claim that the rationality of Barth's theology of revelation is at stake.

The two thoughts, "God is that above which nothing greater can be conceived" and "the essence of God [is that] above or behind which there is nothing higher," share a form. The implications that Barth draws from his formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity straightforwardly reflect the implications of Anselm's *Proslogion* formula. The primary difference is that Anselm gives his argument an explicitly logical form, whereas the logical form of the doctrine of the Trinity is largely implicit. My argument is essentially that to exhibit the structure of Anselm's argument we must exhibit the structuring logic of the doctrine of the Trinity and by extension the structuring logic of the meaningful use of "God" in Barth's theology. These concerns take up the remainder of this chapter.

PRELIMINARY MATTERS

A. First, I want briefly to address in very general terms the question whether the *FQI* signals some form of break or radical change in Barth's theology. Barth explicitly writes that his book on Anselm's proof of the existence of God in *Proslogion* is a key to his own theological method and signals some form of turning point in his theology. There are many ways of interpreting that claim. One can accept it or dismiss it. One can ascribe a strong or weak sense to it.

Dismissing Barth's own account of his work leads to deep interpretive problems. One quickly loses sight of what could serve as a criterion for accurately interpreting his texts if one is free to dismiss what he actually wrote. Yet, accepting his claim still leaves open the question as to what he meant by "key to his work" and how he understands his own work as having undergone some kind of turn or radicalization. We have seen that the development of the doctrine of the Trinity continues a crucial line of argument that runs back to Barth's early theology. Thus, it is clear that the turn does not signal a complete break with what came before. It is more correct to say that with the *FQI* Barth discovers the explicit form of an implicit argument he has been advancing for a while. Seeing the logical form of his overall argument stand out clearly enables him to rid himself of particular aspects of the theological program that he has already developed, since these now seem superfluous or downright mistaken. Concretely, we can see this in the difference between the 1927 Dogmatics and the *Kirchliche Dogmatik* from 1932. In the latter, Barth has cut the two paragraphs that explicitly invoke the "anthropological" aspect of revelation. We can call them the "and" paragraphs: "The Word of God *and* Man as Preacher" and "The Word of God *and* Man as Hearer."

This take on the radicalization of Barth's theology dovetails nicely with Barth's own account of his development in the text, *How My Mind Has Changed*. There he writes:

If I now attempt to judge how far I have actually changed in these last years with regard to my work, then it seems possible to put the case in a formula: I have been occupied approximately equally with the deepening and the application of that knowledge which, in its main channels, I had gained before. ... The deepening consists in this: in these years I have had to rid myself of the last remnants of a philosophical or anthropological (in America one would say "humanistic" or "naturalistic") grounding and exposition of Christian doctrine. The actual document of this departure is not the widely read pamphlet "Nein!" against Brunner in 1934, but rather the book on Anselm of Canterbury's proof of God from 1931, which of all my books is the one written with the most love....²⁹

The formulation is general. I will return to the question of what the "philosophical/anthropological/humanistic/naturalistic" fallacy might be at the end of this chapter, when I engage in a preliminary interpretation of what "speculative theology" means for Barth.

²⁹ Karl Barth, "How my mind has changed, 1928–1958," in *Der Götze wackelt: Zeitkritische Aufsätze, Reden und Briefe von 1930 bis 1960* (Berlin: Käthe Vogt Verlag, 1961), 185.

For now, it is important to note that Barth's own account of his relationship with the book on Anselm fits nicely with how I have argued his theology actually develops. There is a consistent and foundational insight that shapes Barth's theology throughout. This insight concerns the limits to our (human) conceptual spontaneity. He becomes better and better at providing positive formulations that bring out the form of this insight. When its inner, logical form stands out with manifest clarity in his work on Anselm's *Proslogion* 2–4, he recognizes that he made some wrong moves earlier when formulating his dogmatic prolegomena. He finds that these wrong moves are sufficiently significant for him to eliminate those aspects of his argument and rewrite his dogmatic prolegomena for the third time. This, briefly, accounts for the change associated with the *FQI* in Barth's theology. That said, how significant or radical that change appears to be depends on what aspect of his theology one emphasizes.

B. I want to draw attention to another aspect of the context of the *FQI* before I explicitly engage with the text and the argument itself: it is interesting to keep in mind that the book came about as part of a continuous conversation with the philosopher Heinrich Scholz, who was Barth's colleague at Münster. Scholz was educated as a theologian and philosopher, but trained himself to become a professor of mathematics and logic after having read Bertrand Russell's *Principia Mathematica* in 1921. In 1936, he became the editor of Gottlob Frege's unpublished work.

I argued above that one of the most significant aspects of the *FQI* is the way it exhibits the implicit logical form of Barth's fundamental theological insights. The form our arguments take depend on with whom we are actually engaged in an argument. As Barth is writing, he is expecting that Scholz will write his own commentary on Anselm's proof from *Proslogion* 2–4, which, unfortunately, Scholz never did. In other words, Barth's book is explicitly part of a dialogue with a logician about how one is to carry out theology. I am suggesting that the form of this intellectual conversation, where the norms for what counts as a well-formulated argument were shaped in part by the interlocutor, brought out a dimension of Barth's thought that proved particularly fruitful. Explaining himself to a logician allowed him to achieve greater clarity concerning the form of his own approach.

In psychoanalytical terms, we could say that the particular "transference" that Barth experienced in his relationship with Scholz enabled him to find in himself a form of knowledge that was already operational in his praxis. It enabled him to make this form explicit. That the book is written

in the context of this relationship makes it interesting in itself—especially insofar as the book's rhetoric stands out for being quite restrained when compared with many of Barth's other writings.

C. The *FQI* is divided into two parts. The first part outlines Anselm's theological approach as a whole. The second part is a commentary on Anselm's proof of the existence of God from *Proslogion* 2–4, although it also draws heavily on the exchange between Gaunilo of Marmoutiers and Anselm himself concerning the value of the proof. In the preface to the book, Barth qualifies his own use of Anselm by telling his readers that he does not agree with everything in Anselm's approach to theology. We might ask whether that statement applies to the first or the second part of the *FQI*.

In his influential account of the role of the *FQI* in Barth's theology, Bruce McCormack draws attention to the way the book is divided and argues that, if we want to understand Barth's use of Anselm, it is the first part that is the most significant.³⁰ A putative change takes place in Barth's theological scheme, McCormack argues, and in the first part of the *FQI* Barth explicitly reflects on Anselm's theological scheme. McCormack thus argues that if Barth's theology changes after the book on Anselm, then we must look for clues indicating the significance of this change in what Barth writes about Anselm's theology as such. Consequently, there is no mention of the formula "*id quo maius cogitari nequit*" in McCormack's chapter, since his focus is on the first part of Barth's book and explicitly not on the proof itself.

Above I have argued that it is precisely the proof itself that makes the logical form of Barth's own theological approach explicit. Furthermore, it is this insight into logical form that enables Barth to make crucial distinctions and eliminate superfluous or even mistaken aspects of his argument in his prolegomena. This implies that, if there are aspects of Anselm's theology from which Barth might distance himself, we should look for them in the first part. This does not entail that I will put all the weight on the second part of the book. Certainly, the outline of Anselm's theology in the first part bears on how Barth approaches Anselm's proof in the second part. My point is simply that I argue, in opposition to McCormack, that the disclaimer applies to aspects of the first part, and that Barth accepts Anselm's proof as valid—which, it seems to me, is the right thing

³⁰ Bruce McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909–1936* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 429.

to do. This means that when we approach the *FQI* we should keep in mind that not everything in the first part reflects how Barth would wish to present the premises of his own theological project. Comparing two general approaches misses the point of the book. It is the proof itself that matters most.

D. Barth argues very forcefully that Anselm's proof is shaped by a general *theological* approach. Thus, the overarching intention of the first part of the *FQI* is to show that the theological context makes it highly unlikely that Anselm's proof is an "ontological proof," as it has become known. Unless there is strong evidence for a sharp break with Anselm's usual *modus operandi*, we should conclude that the proof is essentially theological. When read straightforwardly along with Anselm's other writings, it is clear that its scope is neither philosophical nor general. It is born out of a specific form of reflective theological engagement that includes answering specific questions. It emerges as part of the praxis of theology and makes less and less sense the further it is abstracted from this context.

Thus, on the very first page, Barth points out that the proof is the first and much shorter part of a two-part theological text, *Proslogion*. And although the *FQI* narrows in on the first chapters of *Proslogion* that contain the proof without delving into the subsequent twenty-one chapters in any detail, we should note that for Anselm there is no sharp distinction to be found here.³¹ Rather, for Anselm, the understanding that he is striving for by means of the proof is "... a spontaneous demand of faith" and this runs through the entire text.³²

Faith is here understood as a determination of the will: "Faith means the free exercise of the will, but an exercise of will by a rational creature means choosing and depends on the distinction between *iustum et iniustum, verum et non verum, bonum et malum*. This distinguishing is clearly the basic act of what we call knowing."³³ This implies that faith expresses itself primarily in a form of practical reasoning. In this sense, faith has an end,

³¹ "For [Anselm] *Prosl.* 5–26 is in actual fact no less important than *Prosl.* 2–4. However the aim of our inquiry should be confined to these three first chapters—the celebrated Proof of the Existence of God." Karl Barth, *Karl Barth Gesamtausgabe – Fides quaerens intellectum: Anselms Beweis für die Existenz Gottes, 1931*, ed. Eberhard Jüngel & Ingolf U. Dalferth (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1981), 9ff; and Karl Barth, *Fides Quaerens Intellectum: Anselm's Proof of the Existence of God in the Context of his Theological Scheme* (London: SCM Press LTD, 1960), 13ff.

³² Barth, *Anselms Beweis*, 14; *Anselm's Proof*, 16.

³³ Barth, *Anselms Beweis*, 17ff; *Anselm's Proof*, 19.

a direction, which is given through an act of divine agency in the form of grace.³⁴ The ultimate end of faith is the vision of God (presumably enjoyed by the blessed in heaven), although, as Barth points out, Anselm does not write about eschatology in any detail.³⁵ The end of faith as expressed in this life is knowledge or understanding. Its aim is to find the right way to form an intention of, or refer to, God now, such that the believer's faith leads to actual knowledge—the abovementioned limitations of the human creature this side of death notwithstanding. In other words, the knowledge of faith concerns what is achievable in this life and not some future eschatological state (although they are related in some unspecified way).

E. Before moving on, I want to return briefly to the issue of the difference between Anselm's theology and Barth's theology. Although the overarching objective is to show that Anselm's proof is theological, Barth does not regard comprehensively aligning Anselm's theology with his own as an end in itself. It will not hurt if Anselm's reflections on praxis and theory roughly follow the same trajectory as Barth's own thoughts, but the most important point is that, when Anselm reasons, he reasons as a theologian and not (abstractly) as a philosopher.

There is one aspect of Anselm's theology that distinguishes it sharply from Barth's own approach. Anselm is an enthusiastic heir to the Augustinian theological tradition, and Barth points out how Anselm explicitly invokes the works of Augustine as the norm of his own thinking.³⁶ We find this expressed in Anselm's commitment to the Augustinian idea of the image of God in the human creature in the form of a trace of the Trinity. That is, the creature has a power that directs it towards a higher, transcendent unity through its capacity for memory, knowledge, and love. These capacities need grace to be actualized properly, but the idea inevitably entails a form of cooperation between revelation and human cognitive capacities. As we have seen, this form of argument is simply not an option for Barth.

To some extent, Barth downplays this aspect of Anselm's theology, but he is aware that it is there and that it marks a difference between them. His approach is to suggest that these elements play no active or justificatory

³⁴ "Inasmuch as faith is faith in God, and therefore really faith in what is right, it is the proper action of the will—due to God, enjoined by God and bound up with saving 'experience.'" Barth, *Anselms Beweis*, 20ff; *Anselm's Proof*, 22.

³⁵ Barth, *Anselms Beweis*, 19; *Anselm's Proof*, 20.

³⁶ Barth, *Anselms Beweis*, 22; *Anselm's Proof*, 23.

role in Anselm's theology. Regarding the proof itself, ideas such as these do not serve as premises and need not be invoked at all. Therefore, we can recognize these tendencies or moments in Anselm's thinking, but we can also set them aside for most practical, theological purposes. To see how it is possible to do this takes us into the heart of Anselm's theology.

F. While Anselm stands in the Augustinian theological tradition (who in the Western Church does not?), the way he presents and argues for his theology is very much his own. Barth examines the form of Anselm's theology under the headings "1. The Necessity of Theology," "2. The Possibility of Theology," "3. The Conditions of Theology," "4. The Manner of Theology" and "5. The Aim of Theology (The Proof)."

I have already discussed some of Barth's arguments from the first section. It aims to bring out how faith necessarily entails a desire for understanding. The argument was that the desire for knowledge does not condition or change the essence of faith, but is part of its form.

Barth begins the second section on the possibility of theology by underscoring the definitive importance of the biblical texts for Anselm's thinking. For Anselm, the biblical texts form the ground of all theological claims, but we should understand the Bible's claim on our thinking in a broad sense, where the inferences that straightforwardly follow from the text are, in some sense, given the same weight as the literal texts.³⁷ This expands the concept of sacred scripture to include the major Trinitarian creeds. They belong to the ground of theology insofar as they are extensions of the immanent logical structure of the biblical texts. Thus, faith gives shape to a collective intellectual space grounded in the biblical texts. In return, the scope of possible interpretations of the texts is shaped by the rational discursive space that emerges gradually through this intellectual engagement of the reading community. Barth writes: "In short, there now emerges the Church—whether as a virtual second source alongside Holy Scripture or simply as norm for the interpretation of Scripture."³⁸

I think this particular way of expressing the relationship between theory and praxis in theology is important. Taken on its own, it does not appear particularly groundbreaking. One could argue that it is a very common structure, wherein praxis gives rise to a theory that then serves as a norm for determining the scope of the praxis. Nonetheless, once we begin to specify how these two aspects inform each other, we can begin to see the

³⁷ Barth, *Anselms Beweis*, 22; *Anselm's Proof*, 23.

³⁸ Barth, *Anselms Beweis*, 22ff; *Anselm's Proof*, 23ff.

contours of what I will argue is a speculative framework. Even at this stage, we can see how the task of theology is to form second-order concepts that make the implicit rational or logical structure of the praxis explicit to generate a comprehensive space of thought where the general concept and the particular instantiation mutually mediate each other. In other words, we can already glimpse the outline of a particular thought-constellation, where two forms of conceptual determination are brought into an explicitly mediating relationship by a form of practical, self-conscious reasoning. This is at least a rough sketch of what speculative thinking at a minimum must include.

Now, does it make sense to use the concept of self-consciousness to describe a crucial aspect of Barth's sketch of a "speculative" theology in the *FQI*, as I just did? Saying that self-consciousness mediates between two conceptual determinations, general and particular, is also saying that there are two distinguishable moments of self-consciousness in operation: one that is concretely engaged in the reading praxis and another that engages an awareness of a universal discursive and inter-subjective space that one also inhabits *qua* one's self-conscious subjectivity. In the *FQI*, we see this conceptual distinction in Barth's reflections on the difference between "*credo*" and "*Credo*" in Anselm's theology. Both obviously include the first-person singular, but the capitalization of the latter suggests that there is something more at stake.

In this context, where the focus is on a particular form of understanding, "*credo*" calls to mind its philosophical cousin "*cogito*," or the "I think." Since it appears in the buildup to his discussion of Anselm's famous proof of the existence of God, one might be forgiven for assuming that Barth is implicitly referring to Descartes. Nevertheless, the appeal to two distinct forms of "I believe," where one is described as subjective and the other as objective, lines up Barth's twofold use of "I believe" with Kant's (and the other German Idealists') twofold use of the "I think." We saw in the chapter on Kant that this dialectical aspect of the "I think" forms the ground of our capacity for judgment and knowledge as such. We are immediately able to go from the particular context in which a concept is used to a reflection on the general rules for applying that and neighboring concepts. A few years later, Hegel forcefully argued that the relationship between these two forms of "I think" is plastic and therefore does not run in only one direction, which entails that with the "I think" we enter a form of absolute idealism, where knowledge and reason are fully manifest and not subject to skepticism and doubt. These insights form the bare bones of Hegel's speculative philosophy.

Barth writes: "... Anselm's subjective *credo* has an objective *Credo* as its unimpeachable point of reference—that is a number of propositions formulated in human words.... It is just this relationship between *credo* and *Credo* that determines how far a Christian can advance from *credere* to *intellegere*, how far therefore theology is possible."³⁹ That seems exactly right. Self-consciously traversing the space between the particular instance and its context to the general rules for the application of concepts and opening up a space for reshaping our immediate understanding of that relationship, accenting its plastic form, is exactly how one advances from believing to understanding. Again, with this basic outline we have entered a space where it seems reasonable to engage in a cautious use of the term "speculative thought."

Barth writes: "In its grasp of the Christian message faith is assuredly nothing less than the awareness of a *vox significans rem*, of a coherent continuity that is expressed logically and grammatically, which, having been heard, is understood and now exists *in intellectu*. Faith of course possesses this awareness in common with unbelief. And unbelief means simply that nothing but this awareness, this *esse in intellectu*, results from hearing the Christian proclamation and that the *vox significans rem* does its work in vain because the man is not aware of the *res* it signifies."⁴⁰ There is a distinction between a logically and grammatically correct statement of whose truth-value we are unaware and the same logically and grammatically correct statement of whose truth-value we are aware. As Barth writes, to the *esse in intellectu* we must add the *intellegere esse in re*. In other words, genuinely knowing is coming to understand the way things actually are as we take them to be. Now this does not entail that we need to step outside the realm of conceptual mediation to get at the truth.

G. We intuitively conceive that things are as they appear to be. Thus, our spontaneous approach to the world is that the way we understand and apply concepts in our individual lives coincides with how everyone else would carry on if they were in our shoes. We can make sense of things because the norm is that the way we subjectively develop and expand our theoretical and practical grasp of the world is in accord with the objectivity of the inter-subjective space of reasons, which ought to include all other self-conscious agents. The exceptional state is the one where we are completely out of touch with how things are objectively. We may imagine that

³⁹ Barth, *Anselms Beweis*, 23; *Anselm's Proof*, 24.

⁴⁰ Barth, *Anselms Beweis*, 23; *Anselm's Proof*, 24ff.

a claim we have made, which on its own is perfectly well formed, actually accords with how things are and how anyone else would take them to be, yet we could be mistaken, since our subjective capacity for judgment and reason is fallible. Thus, there might be disagreement between us and others, and the question of how things actually, truly, objectively are becomes relevant, because we suspect that what we (or they) have claimed was *merely subjective*. That is, this moment of closing the gap between subjectivity and objectivity, when we suspect that things only *seem* to us to be a certain way, is itself a deviation from the norm.

So, to use Barth's and Anselm's terms, if we find ourselves in such a situation, we lose our certainty that things are as they appear and we are required to understand whether what we conceive *in intellectu* is more than a *vox significans rem*, and thus to *intellegere esse in re*. This operation does not require us to leave the sphere of self-conscious conceptual mediation. We are merely trying to discern whether what is *for us* is also *in itself*—to switch to Hegelian terminology. When things are in themselves as they are for us, we have self-conscious knowledge of how things actually are.

The framework of this relationship in the *FQI* is that the believer occupies a space within an inter-subjective, reasoning community and is trying to determine the extent to which his or her subjective perception of how things hang together is articulable, understandable, and defensible within the broader discursive space of reasons. Is my own take comparable with or translatable into the way other rational beings consider things to be? Barth: "If *fides quaerens intellectum*, then all that remains to be considered is the gap separating this awareness that has come about and the assent which has been given."⁴¹ The result is always a deepening of the knowledge that was, in a sense, already present. The advance is always directed towards greater clarity. There is a determinate understanding of progress in theology, where the rigorous reflection and thought of a particular theologian can disclose a deeper, rational structure that has not yet been brought to the surface within the community of the Church. In principle, the *credo* can somewhat reshape the *Credo*. This dialectic lies at the heart of speculative theology. As Barth also puts it: "Anselm always has the solution of his problems already behind him (through faith in the impartial good sense of the decisions of ecclesial authority), while, as it were, they are still ahead."⁴²

⁴¹ Barth, *Anselms Beweis*, 24; *Anselm's Proof*, 25.

⁴² Barth, *Anselms Beweis*, 24; *Anselm's Proof*, 26.

H. As he moves on to discuss the conditions of theology, Barth expands on the consequences of this form of reflection. The form of investigation takes place within a discursive community that recognizes both the subjective “I believe” and the objective “I believe” and is willing to and able to reflect critically on the relationship between the two, considering both as developing and plastic. Now both the subjective and the objective “I believe” are grounded in God’s revelation. This means that we encounter a limit to what reasonably counts as a theological investigation. If someone engages in the conversation by questioning the ground of both the subjective and objective “I believe,” he or she will have attempted to change the subject, or simply not understood the nature of the conversation.

The fact of divine revelation is not itself a matter of discussion in theology. The theologian reflects on how adequate his or her comprehension of the fact of revelation is. This, in turn, implies that the fact of revelation itself may not serve as an argument in theology. In other words, one cannot appeal to its facticity as a way of *settling* a theological question. The brute reality of God cannot be invoked directly to settle a theological discussion. Barth writes: “Strictly speaking, it is only God himself who has a conception of God. All we have are conceptions of objects, none of which are identical with God.”⁴³ In this sense, our creaturely conception of God is and remains inadequate, but this does not entail that our theology itself is inadequate *qua* theology.

As an expression of our creaturely reflection on God’s self-revelation, our theology takes the form appropriate to its nature. Barth writes: “... [J]ust as everything which is not God could not exist apart from God and is something only because of God, with increasing intensity an *aliqua imitatio illius essentiae*, so it is possible for expressions which are really appropriate only to objects that are not identical with God, to be true expressions, *par aliquam similitudinem aut imaginem (ut cum vultum alicuius consideramus in speculo)*, even when these expressions are applied to the God who can never be expressed.”⁴⁴ Theology does not appeal to direct vision or immediate experience of God, but occupies a space of argument and reasoning that shapes concepts perfectly appropriate to its own form as the creature’s discourse on God. Within this sphere, it tests the grounds of what it is possible to formulate reasonably and consistently and thus

⁴³ Barth, *Anselms Beweis*, 28; *Anselm’s Proof*, 29.

⁴⁴ Barth, *Anselms Beweis*, 28ff; *Anselm’s Proof*, 29f.

employs the self-relating negativity of our human self-consciousness to move from *credo* to *Credo* and back again. Its form is plastic, open, and—to a certain extent—experimental. “Not all ‘speculative theology’ says what is true. But even theology which does say what is true is still ‘speculative theology.’ Theology can neither avoid nor ignore the fact of being thus conditioned; nor ought it make it ashamed.”⁴⁵ That theology is speculative is not a deficiency; it does not suggest that theology is essentially inadequate. Rather, as the practical and theoretical expression of human knowledge it is, that is simply its form.

Thus, for the speculative theologian, if a proposition corresponds to the wording of a biblical text, that proposition is in accord with the truth *qua* God’s revelation. Nevertheless, that does not entail that the proposition is as such a theological proposition. A proposition is theological if it gives expression to the inherent rationality of revelation.⁴⁶ Scripture is the norm of theology, but this does not entail that *all* its propositions or formulations are theological propositions or formulations.⁴⁷ Because its essential mark is conceptual mediation in the way just described, theology is speculative. In other words, theology is not simply quoting scripture.⁴⁸

I. In the fourth section of the first part (“The Manner of Theology”), we find a 14-point “program” that outlines the relationship between “ontic necessity,” “ontic rationality,” “noetic necessity,” and “noetic rationality.”

⁴⁵ Barth, *Anselms Beweis*, 24ff; *Anselm’s Proof*, 30.

⁴⁶ Barth, *Anselms Beweis*, 32; *Anselm’s Proof*, 33.

⁴⁷ Barth, *Anselms Beweis*, 42ff; *Anselm’s Proof*, 43.

⁴⁸ Again, what ultimately sets theology apart and makes it distinct is that theology is a reflection on God as revealed in the biblical scriptures. In this sense, its object is free in the fullest sense of the word. God is inconceivable precisely in God’s unconditioned free subjectivity, as the Triune Lord. Theology is thus always—whether implicitly or explicitly—an extension of the form of prayer. “This attitude is not just that of a ‘pious’ thinker who offers his work to the service of the divine work that his work may be done well. It is that of course. But above and beyond that it is a specific and perhaps the most decisive expression of his scientific objectivity” (Barth, *Anselms Beweis*, 38ff; *Anselm’s Proof*, 39). To be in ‘accord’ with its object, the Word of God witnessed in the biblical texts, entails that theology leaves behind the illusion that it can possess or exhaust its object and have the final word. This is not a deficiency in the form of a theologian’s way of knowing, but expresses an actual certainty regarding the form that theological thinking necessarily assumes. The praxis of theology seeks to embody an openness, plasticity and freedom that are analogous to the essential freedom of its object of thought. “In the end, the fact that it reaches its goal is grace, both with regard to the perception of the goal and the human effort to reach it; and therefore in the last analysis it is a question of prayer and the answer to prayer” (Barth, *Anselms Beweis*, 39ff; *Anselm’s Proof*, 40).

Barth's formulations in the program are quite abstract. Its principal aim is to show that Anselm understands reason as a reflection of the immanent necessity or lawfulness of the object considered. That is, the structure of reason is the explicitly conceptual expression of the necessary structure of the object, which determines the rules we have for speaking about it. I will limit myself to giving a bare sketch of the program itself, and instead examine some of the less obvious implications.

Two things are important to note about this section. First, Barth begins by returning to the issue of the relationship between text and thinking in theology. That issue has been in the background of the entire discussion up to this point, but he explicitly opens this section by moving it back to the foreground and proposing that the primary significance of *intellegere*, "understanding," for Anselm is tied to the praxis of reading a text.⁴⁹ We know that reading a text and understanding a text are not the same. As mentioned above, when answering a theological question, simply quoting the biblical text does not get us very far. Instead we must comprehend its purpose, its argument, its intention, and its structure as well as its particular place within a general form of thought. Comprehending these aspects is to discover what Barth calls the "inner text" as opposed to the "outer text."⁵⁰

Second, Barth is walking a conceptual tightrope throughout the section, which can make for difficult reading. He needs to accomplish two ends that can appear contradictory, and he wants to argue that they are not. The human being possesses *ratio* understood as a primary capacity of apprehending experience, formulating conceptions and judgments.⁵¹ Barth wants to underscore the role of this capacity, of reason, in theology and claim that everything we encounter within the text is, in principle, open to conceptual mediation and rational elaboration. In other words, within the conceptual space of the *Credo* everything is to be comprehended rationally and we are nowhere confronted with a brute "Given" that brings thinking to a halt. Nevertheless, this does not entail that human reason becomes unconditionally autonomous in the sense that it

⁴⁹ "[T]o read and ponder what has been already said—that is to say, in the appropriation of truth, actually to traverse that intervening distance (between recognition and assent) and therefore to understand truth as truth" (Barth, *Anselms Beweis*, 40; *Anselm's Proof*, 40).

⁵⁰ Very roughly, the "outer text" is what a computer voice program might read aloud, and the "inner text" is what Reformed pastors struggle to bring out in their sermons.

⁵¹ Barth, *Anselms Beweis*, 44ff; *Anselm's Proof*, 44ff.

can creatively dictate the truth, meaning, and value of God's revelation.⁵² God remains sovereign and ungraspable by our thought—even as reason has free reign within the *Credo*.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Barth wants to find a way to avoid the appearance that the theology of revelation does violence to our conceptual capacities. To assert the sovereignty of God at the expense of our rational capacities is simply unsustainable. It inevitably backfires by opening a space for arbitrariness at the heart of theology, which inevitably leads to subjectivism and mysticism. In technical theological terms, a *sacrificium intellectus* is a *theologically* illegitimate move. The otherness of God, understood as God's unconditional freedom and sovereignty, must be conceptually mediated. We could perhaps say that as self-conscious knowers whatever we encounter within our world is comprehensible, so when we encounter the incomprehensibility of God, we prove able to comprehend that very incomprehensibility. By showing how we can conceptually mediate God's impenetrability, no violence is done to our conceptual capacities even as they encounter a particular limit or restriction.

While Barth stresses that it is not legitimate to appeal to *brute authority* and all theological demonstrations must be carried out "*sola ratione*," by reason alone, he also operates with a constitutive difference between truth as "the ultimate Truth of all things" (*ratio summa natura* or *ratio veritatis*), which is God, and "the truth as getting something right" (*rectitudo*). In one sense, the two are related insofar as to comprehend something correctly is to understand how God willed that particular entity or state of affairs to be *qua* how that thing actually turns out to be (structured). They are unrelated in the sense that comprehending some state of affairs correctly in no way implies having any determinate knowledge of *God's* being, agency, or intention. For the object of investigation, it holds that "... truth is not bound to it but it is bound to truth."⁵³ At a very general level, truth takes the form of recognizing a movement directed from God outwards, where the direction cannot be reversed.

J. In the program, Barth shows how Anselm's use of the concept of reason broadly lines up with his use of the concept of necessity, while also pointing out some interesting differences. As already mentioned, the overarching aim is to demonstrate that Anselm does not reason in the abstract,

⁵² Barth, *Anselms Beweis*, 46; *Anselm's Proof*, 46ff.

⁵³ Barth, *Anselms Beweis*, 45; *Anselm's Proof*, 46.

but seeks to uncover the structural logic or necessity of the objects under investigation. Barth refers to the “object of faith” rather than the “object of thought,” since the overall purpose is to exhibit the rationality of *theological*, as distinct from *philosophical*, inquiry.

The investigated object’s own manifest form structures the inquiry, and the result is the formulation of explicit rules of theological discourse. Thus, the role of reason is to make the implicit laws that structure the object explicit as discursive rules—rules that are open to improvement and critique.⁵⁴ One could therefore say that the program functions as a minimalistic rejection of a Kantian notion of a thing-in-itself within the praxis of theology.

Since Anselm uses *necessitas* and *ratio* somewhat interchangeably, we can conclude that the necessity that inheres in the object is fully articulable in rational, discursive terms.⁵⁵ The difference between *necessitas* and *ratio* opens up for the possibility of progress in theology. We can become more adept at articulating the rules that express the essential structure of the object under investigation. In this sense, *ratio* implies some form of spontaneity in deciding which concept or formulation best serves this purpose. At the same time, the use of this moment of spontaneity turns into nonsense unless it is used with the aim of expressing the essential form of the object itself. As Barth writes: “[T]he rationality of the object of faith also consists in the recognition of its own basis.”⁵⁶ If we are unable to trace back the rational formulations to the form of the object under investigation, then our thinking has swerved into nonsense no matter how reasonable it might otherwise sound. The theory and praxis are speculative insofar as there is this necessary, reflective relationship between object and thought.

In this sense, theological arguments are circular. “Inasmuch as the concept of necessity, though as substantiation it has noetic content too, possesses original affinity with the ontic and inasmuch as the concept of

⁵⁴ It may help to think of what Barth calls the “object of faith” as consisting of biblical passages that speak of the divine role of the “Father,” “the Son” and the “Holy Spirit.” When we hold these passages together, a conceptual form begins to emerge that we trace back to what the texts affirm or deny regarding these figures. Here we do not impose a form on the object of faith; rather, it imposes a form on us that we can make explicit. The rules that govern that conceptual form derive from the implicit form of the object in itself.

⁵⁵ Barth defines *necessitas* as “... the attribute of being unable not to be, or of being unable to be different” and *ratio* as “... conformity to law.” Barth, *Anselms Beweis*, 49; *Anselm’s Proof*, 49.

⁵⁶ Barth, *Anselms Beweis*, 50; *Anselm’s Proof*, 51.

rationality, though as reasonableness it has ontic content too, possesses original affinity with the noetic—to that extent necessity must precede rationality.”⁵⁷ Of course, we do not fully know the underlying necessity before we self-consciously formulate the rules that make its lawfulness explicit—which we can do only because the object itself has a form that is open to conceptual mediation. Nevertheless, it is a virtuous as opposed to a vicious circle, because the result is a recognized progression within the theological discursive space of the Church. Theology includes self-correction. We become more and more skillful at uncovering the inherent rationality of the theological objects. Thus, Barth can conclude: “With the proviso that truth itself is sovereign, Anselm has been successful in his search for the *intellegere* of this noetic rationality which is in fact aimed at noetic necessity by the roundabout argument for the rationality and necessity of the object.”⁵⁸

According to Barth, Anselm understands proof as the bringing about of a self-conscious recognition of the structuring logic of the object under theological investigation. It is to explain what the believer believes, which is why there is no sharp division between a theological explanation aimed at a believer and one aimed at an unbeliever. The form is the same.⁵⁹ Furthermore, it is, more or less, the same thought form found in the dialectic between what Hegel called the object “in-itself” and “for consciousness”—with the one amendment that God stands outside the speculative economy as the ultimate arbiter of truth. Still, that God is the unconditioned, free, and ungraspable sovereign of this relationship is thinkable within this speculative relationship between consciousness and its object.

That is precisely what Anselm wants to prove in *Proslogion* 2–4. With the *id quo maius cogitari nequit*, we gain a form by means of which we can conceptually mediate the incomprehensibility of God. Irrationalism and subjectivism are banished from theology, while the unsublatable negativity entailed in the unconditional affirmation God’s indissoluble subjectivity remains in force. This is what Barth’s theology requires and it is what Anselm’s *Proslogion* delivers.

With these preliminary remarks on the overall structure of Anselm’s theological epistemology, it is high time to turn to his proof of the existence of God.

⁵⁷ Barth, *Anselms Beweis*, 51; *Anselm’s Proof*, 51.

⁵⁸ Barth, *Anselms Beweis*, 52; *Anselm’s Proof*, 53.

⁵⁹ Barth, *Anselms Beweis*, 71; *Anselm’s Proof*, 71.

THE PROOF

A. I turn now to Barth's direct commentary on Anselm's proof from *Proslogion*. I will first address the explicit conceptual presuppositions of the proof. I will then examine the development of the proof and how it progresses from *Proslogion* 2 to 3. Finally, I will examine Barth's concluding remarks in the *FQI* and return briefly to the doctrine of the Trinity in *Kirchliche Dogmatik I,1* to introduce the issue of the divine essence and freedom in somewhat greater detail.

The most important presupposition of the proof pertains to the function of the formula, *id quo maius cogitari nequit*, which Barth calls "the name of God." The specific formulation of the name is somewhat plastic (the first time it appears in *Proslogion*, it is rendered as *aliquid quo nihil maius cogitari possit*). The point is that the precise wording is less important than what Frege would have called the "thought" that the formula expresses: something than which nothing greater can be conceived or thought.

An initial question might be, how we should understand the word "greater" (*maius* or *melius*): Barth argues that it should be understood in the most general sense, where it can refer to "greatness" in relation to time and space, power, mental attributes, and inner or outer value.⁶⁰ What matters here is how "greater" is related to the negation. We do not need to fix on some form of positive "greatness," but rather to grasp the impossibility of positing anything superior to it. The proof concerns form directly and content only indirectly. Barth writes: "[I]t does not say—God is the highest that man has in fact conceived, beyond which he can conceive nothing higher. Nor does it say—God is the highest man could conceive. Thus it denies neither the former reality nor the latter possibility, but leaves open the question of the givenness of them both. Clearly it is deliberately chosen in such a way that the object which it described emerges as completely independent of whether men in actual fact conceive it or can conceive it."⁶¹ It is chosen to express the way the possible object of thought is completely unconditioned by any other thoughts we might have about it. We do not assert anything positive by means of the formula. It denotes something that is free in relation to our thinking, while our thinking turns out to be bound by it. As Barth continues: "All the formula says about this

⁶⁰ Barth, *Anselms Beweis*, 76; *Anselm's Proof*, 74.

⁶¹ Barth, *Anselms Beweis*, 76; *Anselm's Proof*, 74.

object is, as far as I can see, this one thing, this one negative: nothing greater than it can be imagined; nothing can be imagined that in any respect whatsoever could or would outdo it; as soon as anyone conceives anything which in any respect whatsoever is greater than it, insofar as it can be conceived at all—then he has not yet begun to conceive it or has already ceased.... [W]e are dealing with a concept of strict noetic content which Anselm [denotes] here as a concept of God. It does not say that God is, nor what he is, but rather, in the form of a prohibition that man can understand, who he is.”⁶² This name for God expresses a rule, which can be understood and which can be followed.

B. It is this aspect of Anselm’s theology that makes it speculative in the positive sense. It makes no positive claims about God’s being or about what we do or do not know. It simply provides a rule for meaningful talk about God. “... [I]t expresses nothing about the nature of God but rather lays down a rule of thought which, if we follow it, enables us to endorse statements about the Nature of God accepted in faith (for example, the statement of his incomprehensibility) as our own necessary thoughts. This necessary thought which is endorsed, the Proof, itself stands of course under the shadow of the incomprehensibility of God; it stands with the proviso that thinking is merely speculative, simply *per similitudinem* not *per proprietatem*, with the proviso that in itself it is an empty form ever requiring to be filled from above, by the Truth itself.”⁶³ The rule is explicitly “noetic,” as Barth would put it. It does reflect an “ontic” necessity (“standing under the shadow of the incomprehensibility of God”) and, as such, gives explicit expression to the *implicit form* of the object of faith itself. It does not itself assert that God is incomprehensible, but provides a rule for thinking and speaking about this incomprehensibility.

This allows us to begin to speak sensibly about God. It leads to a deeper understanding of the form of the object itself, which, in turn, allows for greater precision in formulating the rules that make that form explicit. In other words, we have a form of theological knowing through which a greater and greater grasp of the content becomes possible while completely respecting the unconditioned freedom of the object itself.⁶⁴

⁶² Barth, *Anselms Beweis*, 76ff; *Anselm’s Proof*, 75.

⁶³ Barth, *Anselms Beweis*, 82; *Anselm’s Proof*, 80.

⁶⁴ For Barth, the exchange between the monk, Gaunilo of Marmoutiers, and Anselm is further confirmation of this reading. We explicitly see how the proof provides a form through which it becomes possible to determine what can sensibly be said about God, but does not itself make any positive claims. Gaunilo takes the formula directly to be making positive

C. A second important issue to be addressed before exploring the proof itself concerns what Anselm means by “existence” in the proof. Anselm essentially argues that if we can conceive something as possibly existing, then we can also conceive of it as existing in reality. If something is conceived as both possibly existing and existing in reality then we can conceive of it as existing in the full sense—although that conception may prove to be an innocent mistake, a downright error, or a mere hypothesis.

Now “actual existence” as distinct from a mere conception of existence requires that the object stands over and against thought and is irreducible to something that is limited to the subjective sphere. “The question of the knowledge of an object must go further than knowing it as existing (that means, in knowing it as having the power and reality of existence). To be true knowledge, to be knowledge of the truth, it must press on to knowledge of the existence of the object thus known in itself, to knowledge of its objectivity. Not till the question of knowledge reaches this second outer circle, not till it probes whether the object exists beyond mere thought, is it really in earnest.”⁶⁵ How should we understand this line of reasoning?

I think the easiest way to understand the argument is to keep the basic Hegelian framework with which I have been working in mind.⁶⁶ Although he does not use the same terms, Barth’s argument follows the basic Hegelian distinction between something’s existing in itself and for consciousness. If an object of thought cannot enter into this dialectic through which our subjective grasp of it is open to being revealed as a mere

“ontic” claims about God. He takes the thought it expresses to be “that which is greatest of all” (*quod est. maius omnibus*). He does not recognize that this choice of predicate inevitably expresses an arbitrary subjectivism as long as the “noetic rules” for discourse about God are not in place. For example, the “all” in Gaunilo’s formula presupposes the existence of an indefinite set of other objects that are construed in such a way that they point to the “greatest object of all.” Such reasoning rests on several implicit judgments, including value judgments, that must be made in advance and that are all open to criticism or denial. “The very thing that Anselm intended should make it valid as a proof, its austere character as a rule for thinking about God, was thereby taken away from it and it is hardly surprising that, on the basis of this presupposition, Gaunilo was not able to appreciate Anselm’s actual Proof” (Barth, *Anselm’s Beweis*, 88; *Anselm’s Proof*, 87). As opposed to Gaunilo’s assumptions, Anselm’s formula does not presuppose any prior judgments, or the existence or nature of any particular object, not even God. What it says is simply that if we are trying to conceive of God then we may not conceive of anything superior, “higher,” or “greater.”

⁶⁵ Barth, *Anselm’s Beweis*, 94; *Anselm’s Proof*, 93.

⁶⁶ One could also use the Sellarsian framework from “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind,” which makes much the same argument.

appearance, we are unable to give an actual account of its objective form, its being in itself. If we cannot do this, then the object does not exist in the full sense. We can thus make a distinction between a subjective notion of an object's existence and its actual existence.

A merely subjective notion can extend quite far. It might include a conception of the possibility of the object's existence and the conception of its reality, but such a notion would still be limited to the strictly subjective sphere of mere appearance as long as we are unable to give a satisfactory account of its objectivity, which includes our capacity for self-correction in relation to the object. Thus, we inevitably operate with a distinction between something that is limited or restricted to the subjective sphere and something that is not so limited or restricted. That is the basic distinction between being subjective and being objective.

It is important to keep in mind that this framework does not entail that we appeal to something immediately given or extra-conceptual as the true criterion of existence. It is not a question of having a conceptual framework on the one hand and brute reality on the other, and then finding a way to correlate the two. The subjective and the objective are moments in a dialectic of self-conscious knowing, where existence is not defined as simply external to the conceptual scope of consciousness. In this dialectic of self-conscious knowing, what actually exists (in truth, as both Barth and Hegel would say) has a conceptual priority over what merely exists in the mind of the subject. Thus the sphere of the strictly subjective, which includes concepts such as "an appearance," is related to the question of applying the correct concept to what presents itself as being thus and so. Or, in more technical terms, the logic of the strictly subjective form of thought, represented by the verb "to seem," depends on the logic of objectivity, represented by the verb "to be." Thus, the capacity to determine that something objectively exists mediates between the object itself and its appearance to a subject. Barth writes: "The object then is first of all in truth, then following from that it exists, then as a consequence of that it can be thought. Without the middle step of existing what is thought could not be real."⁶⁷ This provides us with the key to understanding Anselm's proof. As Barth writes: "It has to be shown that it is impossible to conceive the object described as God as being only a conception."⁶⁸ In other words, the point is to demonstrate that it is inconceivable that God

⁶⁷ Barth, *Anselms Beweis*, 94; *Anselm's Proof*, 92.

⁶⁸ Barth, *Anselms Beweis*, 96; *Anselm's Proof*, 94.

is limited to existing within the subjective sphere alone. For the theologian, this is the issue of applying the right concept of God, which Barth consistently argues is Anselm's actual errand.

As we have already seen, for the theologian it is not a question of whether or not there is a God. The self-revealing God has always already settled that question. The issue is how to properly speak and think about God, who has already proved to be God in God's revelation. Thinking and speaking about the self-revealing God must entail that knowledge of God is objective, and that depends on whether the actual affirmation of God precludes the possibility that the notion of God is merely subjective.

D. Here we can detect a distinction between the Hegelian framework and Barth's argument in the *FQI*. Within the Hegelian framework, it is always possible to conceive of something as not existing or existing differently. Any given object that is part of a particular state of affairs can be subtracted from the picture, can be thought away. There is no logical contradiction in this form of counterfactual reflection. It is simply an aspect of our capacity for abstraction and reasoning, a standard part of our toolkit that even includes the possibility of counterfactually subtracting ourselves as particular knowers from the equation. Therefore, while Hegel shows that our concepts reach all the way to the objects themselves and that philosophical skepticism confuses a particular aspect of the capacity for knowledge with the capacity itself, it does not make sense to him to prove the existence of any particular object. We can show that it makes no sense radically to question our knowledge of the external world and its mode of appearance in general, but no particular worldly object impresses itself necessarily on our thought in such a way that we can prove its existence.⁶⁹ No particular object forces itself on us in such a way that it negates the capacity of the self-conscious subject to assert its full conceptual freedom and mastery.

Now, for Anselm, only God's singular existence can be proved, because, if God does exist, God must exist necessarily.⁷⁰ In other words, if God exists, God is not a merely contingent being, but the necessary being that conditions the existence of all particular things. If something is necessary then it must be possible to make its necessity explicit, that is, to prove it. Thus Barth can argue: "The existence of God is not only unique but it is

⁶⁹ "And for that very reason in the end it can certainly be known to exist in the usual way, but it cannot be proved to exist." Barth, *Anselms Beweis*, 100ff; *Anselm's Proof*, 99.

⁷⁰ Barth, *Anselms Beweis*, 99; *Anselm's Proof*, 98.

the sole existence which is real and ultimate, the very basis of all other existences and therefore just because of that also the only existence which in the strict sense can be proved.”⁷¹ Therefore, it makes no sense to prove the existence of beautiful islands, winged horses, or the specific content of one's pockets or purses, since these objects—like all other worldly objects we encounter—do not impose themselves on the thinking subject as necessarily existing. If God exists, then God does.

With these distinctions in mind, I want to turn to Barth's commentary on Anselm's proof of the existence of God in *Proslogion*. As with *Romans II*, I will be writing a commentary on a commentary on a text. As I wrote at the beginning of this chapter, and have argued elsewhere, I think Barth gets Anselm right. I will therefore not draw any sharp line between what Barth argues and what Anselm argues. Instead, I look at the text as a whole—including Anselm's own argument as it stands in the *FQI*.

E. We have considered Anselm's specific formula, which Barth refers to as the name of God: *id quo maius cogitari nequit*, or that than which nothing greater can be conceived. The question that shapes the second chapter of *Proslogion* and the first part of the proof itself is this: “Is there no such nature because the fool has said in his heart: ‘there is no God?’”⁷² In other words, is God merely something that exists only in the mind of a subject and not a necessary and objective existence?

Barth immediately stresses that this is a theological question, which means that although it does not concern faith itself, it concerns thinking within faith.⁷³ The question represents the antithesis of faith, the position of unbelief, as something that must be considered and thought through within faith. The question, adopted from Psalm 14, serves as a foil to bring the believer's own implicit form of knowledge to self-consciousness. What is at stake is not simply two logically contradictory statements, but two opposed ways of being involved in a form of thinking as a self-conscious subject.

As Barth writes, they do not “... simply represent logical contradictions, but are first and foremost symbols of two radically different modes of human existence determined by a fundamentally different attitude of man to God; ultimately they are expressions of two quite different judgments

⁷¹ Barth, *Anselms Beweis*, 101; *Anselm's Proof*, 99.

⁷² Barth, *Anselms Beweis*, 105; *Anselm's Proof*, 103. See also Anselm, *Major Works*, 87.

⁷³ Barth, *Anselms Beweis*, 106; *Anselm's Proof*, 103.

over against God himself.”⁷⁴ Two modes of existence determined by two different judgments means two different forms of understanding one’s own position (two distinct takes on being an “I” in the “I think” or “I believe”), where the formal difference has to do with what it is possible to think regarding God without falling into contradiction. In other words, it is two ways of being conscious of what it is to be oneself that are informed by one’s grasp of the rules for using the concept God. Even if he does not explicitly use the term here, we can see how Barth’s argument entails a reflection on the form that the relationship between faith and self-consciousness (*credo* and *Credo*) takes.

Now, even if an important aspect of the proof is its outlining a difference between two forms of being an “I,” we are speaking about two ways of being a human creature. They belong together in the obvious sense that they are species of the same genus, distinguished from other genera of living beings by self-consciousness and discursive rationality. The point of stressing this is not to invoke some common knowledge as the basis for the proof. It is simply to assert that, as rational discursive beings, both the believer and the unbeliever can grasp the sense of the formula, *id quo maius cogitari nequit*. Thus the subject representing unbelief understands what Anselm means by saying that God is that than which nothing greater can be conceived. “All that *dico* means explicitly is—I utter this formula; and *audit*—he hears it in the physical sense; and (this is how Anselm explains himself later), he understands it grammatically and logically.”⁷⁵ In other words, the unbeliever (or “fool” as the figure is named in *Proslogion*) can grasp the thought that the formula expresses. Even if he or she wants to deny that *id quo maius cogitari nequit* objectively exists, he or she cannot do so without knowing what is negated. Thus, the fool understands that the assertion that something than which nothing greater can be conceived exists can be either true or false. “Whoever agrees ... always to interpret in future the word *Deus* by the formula *quo maius cogitari nequit*, cannot subsequently come forward with the complaint that for him the literal meaning of ‘God’ is a sound that has no meaning.”⁷⁶ So far, so good.

F. As we have just seen, we can talk about something’s existing in the mind of a subject (a conception of a being or state of affairs), insofar as we can raise the question whether the object of faith or object of thought

⁷⁴ Barth, *Anselms Beweis*, 107ff; *Anselm’s Proof*, 105.

⁷⁵ Barth, *Anselms Beweis*, 109; *Anselm’s Proof*, 107.

⁷⁶ Barth, *Anselms Beweis*, 110; *Anselm’s Proof*, 108.

belongs to the set of things that also exist outside and over against the mind, objectively. That is, does our thought of this being have an actual purchase on how things stand objectively? We can ask whether a given object of faith or thought is also given as an object or state of affairs in the extra-mental world. Asserting the merely intra-mental existence of some object or state of affairs does not commit one to a generalized skepticism about our grasp of the external world. In fact, the capacity to distinguish between what is merely in the mind and what is objectively there over and against the mind as well is essential to concrete self-correction; comparing what is in one's mind with what is outside one's mind is essential to understanding what rationality is. It underscores that we operate with a distinction between potentially subjective "appearances" and how things objectively are as a matter of fact, and it is part of how we come to know that things are, in fact, thus and so.

Barth comments on the analogy Anselm draws to works of art in *Proslogion* 2: "There is an intramental existence of objects as well as one that is both intramental and extramental; thus there is also a corresponding double knowledge of existence. The second is true, real knowledge of existence to which the first is related as an artistic conception that may bear fruit or may be for ever barren is related to the work of art that may issue from it as its fulfilment, vindication and justification."⁷⁷ As Barth is quick to point out, the analogy with works of art should not be taken to imply a specific precedence in time, whereby what exists in the subject's mind is somehow always prior to the existence of the object both in thought and reality. Of course, the general rule is that we directly perceive things as they are—in both thought and objective reality, simultaneously.⁷⁸ Yet sometimes we can innocently categorize something that is only in the mind as existing both in the mind and in reality, and vice versa. The analogy only makes this potential disjunction between how we take things to be and how they in fact are explicit.

Now it is important to keep in mind that Anselm's proof in *Proslogion* is divided into two chapters that reflect two distinct parts of the proof. Barth refers to the parts respectively as "the general existence of God" and "the special existence of God." The argument for the general existence of God turns on demonstrating that "*id quo maius cogitari nequit*" cannot exist only in the mind. Something that exists only in the mind would exist in the

⁷⁷ Barth, *Anselms Beweis*, 122; *Anselm's Proof*, 119.

⁷⁸ Barth, *Anselms Beweis*, 123; *Anselm's Proof*, 120.

same way as an unproven hypothesis, a daydream, a perceptual error, or an illusion. Anselm presents the reader with the option that it is possible to form a concept of God that way, as existing only in the mind and in the same category as hypotheses, perceptual illusions, or dreams. As Barth points out, when we think of things as belonging to this category it signals that we are withholding a commitment to their objective, extra-mental existence. Sorting something in this way entails that we are also able to conceive of an alternative object or state of affairs, to which we do not presently commit ourselves, in which the thing thought also exists in reality. Barth: “Anselm first assumed the possibility, the premise that the phrase, God exists in knowledge, understood in the restricted sense, is to be taken as definitive: that is, God exists only in knowledge. If this were so, the possibility would nonetheless remain of removing in thought the parenthesis ‘only in knowledge’ and of ascribing to this God, contrary to his self-imposed reality, an existence consisting not only in knowledge but also in objectivity.”⁷⁹ If we form a concept of something that exists in thought alone, having only the properties and qualities that belong to something that is merely subjective, this expresses a restriction in relation to the concept of something’s existing both in the mind and objectively outside the sphere of the mind. Something that exists only in the mind is placed in a different category from something that exists both in and outside the mind. We know what it would mean to lift the restriction and place something in the category of existing both subjectively and objectively.

The rule that a being that exists in knowledge and objectively is “greater” than one that merely exists in knowledge is thus an inference drawn from Anselm’s basic framework for thinking about what there truly is.⁸⁰ On this issue, Anselm’s theology is surprisingly close to important developments in present day epistemology, which seeks to avoid slipping into the pitfalls of modern skepticism. That is, if we reject a Cartesian conception of certainty, which prioritizes mental representations as distinct from objects themselves, while we preserve the essential insight that self-consciousness (self-reference) is an irreducible component of true knowledge, we end up with an epistemological framework that largely lines up with Anselm of Canterbury’s take on knowledge and truth.⁸¹

⁷⁹ Barth, *Anselms Beweis*, 127; *Anselm’s Proof*, 124.

⁸⁰ Barth, *Anselms Beweis*, 128; *Anselm’s Proof*, 125.

⁸¹ It is fascinating to read Anselm’s *De Veritate* with a roughly Hegelian framework in mind. The discussion of the relationship between sense perception and reason is strikingly

We are free to go along with Anselm's argument that we can be confronted with the thought of a *minus* and the thought of a *maius*, a lesser and a greater. We can form one concept of God as existing only in the mind. We can also form a concept of God that is not so limited. This does not mean that we are adding a predicate, "existence," to a God who exists only in the mind.⁸² Rather, we are conceiving of two distinct objects of faith: God who exists only in the mind, and God who exists both in the mind and in reality. Barth: "We saw that it is possible, going beyond the assumed reality of God's existence *in solo intellectu*, to conceive God as existing *in intellectu et in re*. But in so doing we do not conceive of the same God but of a being who is different, greater and superior. What is the consequence? The consequence is that it becomes quite impossible to identify this being who exists *in solo intellectu* with God. God is *id quo maius cogitari nequit*."⁸³

Here we have next to each other thoughts of two beings that are both defined as something than which nothing greater can be conceived, where restrictions are placed on the one and not on the other. The first being is defined as that than which nothing greater can be conceived and yet we can conceive of something that is greater. That is a contradiction in terms, and it follows that the first being that was only in the mind cannot be that than which nothing greater can be conceived. As Barth writes:

What Anselm regards as having been proved by what has gone before is that the thing described as *aliquid quo maius cogitari non valet* has existence not only in knowledge but also has objective (and to that extent genuine) existence. Now how far has that been proved? In so far as it has been shown that God exists in the knowledge of the hearer when the Name of God is preached, understood and heard. But he cannot exist merely in the knowledge of the hearer because a God who exists merely thus stands in impossible contradiction to his own Name as it is revealed and believed, because, in other words, he would be called God

similar to views that modern-day "Hegelians" such as John McDowell hold. Both argue that our senses do not lie, but present us with things as they are; both argue that what is true is what is rational, and our capacity for reasoning correctly about our experiences is fallible. In other words, we have a fallible capacity to know how things truly are—and that capacity is an expression of our form as discursive creatures.

⁸² "It is not settled that this *minus* cannot be identical with God but it should not be overlooked that over against him this *maius* is at the same time an *aliud*, something not identical with him, not a predicate that he can have added to himself but a new second subject distinct from him." Barth, *Anselm's Beweis*, 129; *Anselm's Proof*, 126.

⁸³ Barth, *Anselm's Beweis*, 129; *Anselm's Proof*, 126.

but would not be God. Thus God cannot exist in knowledge as the one who exists merely in knowledge. It should be noted that nothing has been proved beyond this negative.⁸⁴

The positive formulation, that God exists both in the mind and in reality, we know from revelation and it is not, as such, part of the proof itself. It is only proved insofar as its negation is excluded. The self-revealing God does exist in the mind, when God is proclaimed as the one above whom nothing greater can be conceived, but cannot be thought by us to exist in the mind alone. *Proslogion* Chap. 2 demonstrates that when and where God is known, it is impossible for us, rational discursive creatures, to claim that God does not exist objectively. Here we begin to see the contours of the form of the logic of affirmation that has been Barth's concern all along. God's revelation is expressed in an unconditioned affirmation on the part of its human recipient because it logically excludes the possibility of denial. I say that we begin to see the contours, because the proof is not yet brought to an end. We cannot deny God's extra-mental existence, but God does not exist in the way that the world and the objects in it do. The logic of affirmation pushes us further. It draws us into the proof of the special existence of God, which is established in *Proslogion* Chap. 3: *quod non possit cogitari non esse*, or that he could not be conceived as not existing.

G. As I mentioned above, a definitive difference between Anselm's theological epistemology and Hegel's account of subjectivity and objectivity turns on the issue of the freedom of the self-conscious subject, especially with regard to the capacity for abstraction and counterfactual reflection. For Hegel, no particular "existence" is necessary, because it is always within the power of self-consciousness to conceive of any given thing as not existing or existing differently. Something might present itself as materially necessary, but self-consciousness is always free to form a conception whereby the necessity is either changed or simply subtracted from the equation. Thus, self-consciousness raises itself out of the merely natural sphere dominated by necessity and contingency and becomes free. This "spiritual" freedom entails the capacity for abstraction, subtraction, and thus counterfactual reflection.

In light of the argument made in *Proslogion* 2, Anselm has demonstrated that God cannot exist in the mind alone, but must exist both in the mind and in reality. In Hegelian terms, God is both "for consciousness" and "in

⁸⁴ Barth, *Anselms Beweis*, 131; *Anselm's Proof*, 128.

itself.” In other words, we cannot deny that God exists over and against our thought of God. We cannot deny that God exists in the way that any given object is said to actually exist within the Hegelian framework.

The outstanding issue is this: “[T]he very impossibility of thus denying the existence of a being can be understood as a merely factual denial that accompanies a recognition of this being’s existence in fact, though insisting that in theory it might be possible for it not to exist. What we know as existing *in intellectu et in re* we cannot in fact at the same time conceive as not existing. But we cannot deny that we could think of it in itself as not existing (assuming that the factual possibility would not hinder us)... [T]he question now arises, whether it is true that the reason that prevents the actual denial of the Existence of God can also debar even the hypothetical conception of the non-existence of God.”⁸⁵

Here we confront the theological issue of the powers and capacities of the self-conscious subject head on. Throughout Barth’s writings, this has been perhaps *the* essential issue. In terms of its conceptual autonomy, does the human subject remain completely sovereign, unchanged, in the face of God’s revelation? If the answer is “yes,” then how do we know where our values, concepts, and feelings stop and God’s sovereignty begins? *Prosligion 2* brings this issue to the forefront once more.

I have already mentioned how the position of “the fool” represents a form of self-consciousness, structured around a particular judgment over against God. If God exists just as all other objects exist this merely presents God as another object. Then God is subject to the power of the self-conscious knower, who could acknowledge that God may very well exist but finds that God is utterly irrelevant, carries no value, does not live up to expectations (ethical, aesthetic, political, etc.). God would merely be another entry on the list of middle-sized dry goods that make up the world. Whether or not this is the case depends on whether God proves to be sovereign even in the face of the tremendous power of self-conscious thought, which—as the German Idealists clearly saw—shapes itself and its world through its reason, freedom, and values. *Prosligion 3* takes the logical power of the Name of God into this ultimate sphere of human self-conscious autonomy: “Our chapter affirms the exception that is made here: the revealed Name of God has more power than the positive knowledge that we have of the existence of other things *in intellectu et in re*. It compels in him who hears and understands it a recognition not only of the

⁸⁵ Barth, *Anselms Beweis*, 136; *Anselm’s Proof*, 133.

actual impossibility of the thought that God does not exist but also of the impossibility of that thought ever being conceived.”⁸⁶ And, again, we should notice the implicit suggestion that the Name of God does not simply do violence to the self-conscious subject’s essential conceptual capacities, but rationally, logically, compels the listening and understanding subject to recognize the impossibility of passing a sovereign judgment on the revelation of God’s unoblatably subjectivity. That claim forms a crucial part of what Barth must now prove.

H. Anselm’s argument in *Proslogion 3* follows the same dialectic as the argument in *Proslogion 2*. It is a radicalization or, as Barth puts it, a narrowing of the proof. Barth: “It is now no longer a contrast between something that exists on the one hand merely in thought and on the other hand in thought and objectively but a contrast between something that certainly exists objectively as well as in thought but yet which is conceivable as not existing and on the other hand something existing objectively and in thought but which is not conceivable as not existing. Out of a general *vere esse* there now rises significantly before us a *vere esse* whose reality has its basis neither merely subjectively nor merely subjectively and objectively but is based beyond this contrast, *a se*, in itself.”⁸⁷ We can formulate this distinction in several ways: as between contingent being and necessary being, as between the conditioned and the unconditioned, as between what grounds itself and what is grounded by something else, as between something that is determined by our subjectivity and something that determines our subjectivity, as between what we have the power to shape and what has the power to shape us. Once again, we have conceived of two beings: the affirmation of the existence of the first is limited, restricted, or conditioned; the affirmation of the existence of the second is unconditioned, with the conceivable restrictions lifted. “Whoever thinks of these two beings side by side has conceived this ‘greater’ over against a ‘smaller.’”⁸⁸

The conclusion follows: “The God who is revealed is called *id quo maius cogitari nequit*. And from that we again have this intolerable contradiction: this God who though existing can be conceived as not existing, is called *id quo maius cogitari nequit* and yet is not that. That a *maius* is conceivable has just been shown. *Quod convenire non potest*. Once again it

⁸⁶ Barth, *Anselms Beweis*, 137; *Anselm’s Proof*, 134.

⁸⁷ Barth, *Anselms Beweis*, 144; *Anselm’s Proof*, 141.

⁸⁸ Barth, *Anselms Beweis*, 145; *Anselm’s Proof*, 142.

is obvious that a pseudo-God has to be unmasked and the Name of God denied to a being who cannot be seriously taken as God.”⁸⁹ I want to draw attention to the implicit dialectic involved in this conclusion. I am not thinking of the argument as such, to which I will return shortly. I want to focus on the “critique of religion” or “unmasking of pseudo-God” that follows from the proof.

Although by now it is largely just a slogan, Barth is known for his critique of religion within the praxis of theology. It is therefore interesting that Barth discovers a form of theological reasoning that results in precisely this kind of “unmasking” of idols. It draws our attention to the way the relationship between affirmation and negation has developed from *Romans II* onwards that I discussed in relation to the doctrine of the Trinity above. The unconditional affirmation of God’s revelation precedes the negation that results from thinking through the form of revelation. It is not that negation and affirmation stand side by side, and death and judgment bring us to a halt and undermine our ideological constructs, if we are to be able to acknowledge God. It is rather that the positive affirmation cannot but result in our thought being put to work, which is partially expressed and grasped in a particular form of negation and critique. The negativity does not bring thought to a halt. Rather, it becomes an expression of how our capacity to reason itself is drawn into the movement of God’s revelation.

We see this explicitly as Barth returns to the question that he also asked in the commentary on *Prosligion 2*: to what extent is the conclusion binding?⁹⁰ Once again, the explicit conclusion is that God cannot be thought not to exist. The actual positive conclusion, that God so exists that his non-existence is inconceivable, is derived from revelation and faith.⁹¹ God as revealed in the biblical scriptures and the reading and reflecting praxis of the Church supplies the positive dogmatic formulations that contain this thought, such as the trinity of God and the incarnation. Theology proves rationally that it is so, but not by directly proving the truth of revelation—God alone is that truth and we cannot pass such judgments on God’s being or acts (as Anselm’s proof demonstrates). Theology can prove that it is so by demonstrating that the opposite claims, the negation of God’s sovereignty and freedom, are reduced *ad*

⁸⁹ Barth, *Anselms Beweis*, 145; *Anselm’s Proof*, 142.

⁹⁰ Barth, *Anselms Beweis*, 146; *Anselm’s Proof*, 143.

⁹¹ Barth, *Anselms Beweis*, 152; *Anselm’s Proof*, 150.

absurdum.⁹² As Barth writes, invoking the language of his exposition of Anselm's theological program: "*Intellegere* means to see into the noetic rationality and therefore into the noetic necessity of the statements that are revealed, on the basis that they possess ontic rationality and necessity as revealed statements, prior to all *intellegere*, to all 'proof' and therefore not based on proof. This can only happen in theology as such. But it can happen and it is what in fact has happened here."⁹³ Not all speculative theology gets things right, but even theology which does get things right is still speculative theology.

I. The third chapter of *Proslogion* forms the heart of Anselm's and Barth's speculative theology.⁹⁴ It is here that our self-conscious rationality is fully drawn into the theological praxis, and the logical form of affirmation is made explicit. The last remnant of arbitrariness, immediacy, and free-floating subjectivity are brought within the space of reasons and objectivity, and, in this specific sense, conceptually sublated. The form of God's revelation reaffirms our conceptual capacities as self-conscious subjects by providing a rational recognition of our position as creatures that have obtained actual knowledge of their creator. The negation is not brute, but rather a rational expression of the fact that going beyond a certain point results in nonsense. As Barth puts it: "As such, and from him who stands over against us, we do not fail to hear this Name of God and we unhesitatingly accept the prohibition it expresses. To what extent? To the extent that the creature stands absolutely under his Creator and remains there and therefore in his thinking cannot set anything above the Creator. Along with his existence, he also has his thinking about existence, its values and its degrees, all entirely from the Creator.... The conception of a better beyond the Creator would imply for the creature an ascent (*ascendere*) to a point where by nature he cannot stand, a judgment (*iudicare*) by a standard of truth or value, which by nature he cannot possess. Conceiving of a greater than the Creator would therefore mean absurdity—not in the literal sense but the great logical-moral absurdity which just because it is that, cannot be."⁹⁵

Above, I mentioned that *Proslogion* 2–4 formally outlines two distinct shapes of self-consciousness, expressed by two separate judgments over and against God. To understand who God is and to understand who one

⁹² Barth, *Anselms Beweis*, 146; *Anselm's Proof*, 143.

⁹³ Barth, *Anselms Beweis*, 146ff; *Anselm's Proof*, 144.

⁹⁴ Barth, *Anselms Beweis*, 156ff; *Anselm's Proof*, 155.

⁹⁵ Barth, *Anselms Beweis*, 155; *Anselm's Proof*, 152ff.

is oneself are two sides of the same coin.⁹⁶ With the certain knowledge that accompanies faith in God's self-revelation comes a knowledge of self-consciousness; with the recognition of the objectivity of God's being comes a recognition of the shape of the human subject of faith. To a certain extent, the difference in self-consciousness is an expression of a difference in praxis. It is as one concretely engages in the practices that constitute the Church that one's subjectivity is formed in accordance with the recognition of God's freedom and sovereignty—and a sphere of nonsense (or idolatry) is revealed. This is why Barth can refer to what is excluded as a logical-moral absurdity. It pertains to the whole of the self-conscious creature and is not limited to the sphere of theoretical knowledge. As theoretical knowledge it is structured by practice, and issues in a deeper understanding of how one concretely *does* theology.

Again, we can see that Rudolf Bultmann was not completely wrong when he described Barth's theology as concerned with religious self-consciousness—although what he appears to have meant by that bears very little resemblance to the rational and speculative theology that Barth ultimately developed. Nonetheless, it is true that theology must confront the issue of the self-conscious subject. Barth saw this clearly. The German Idealists made it impossible to circumvent the question of the role of the self-conscious subject in theology and Barth takes up the challenge. To use a martial metaphor, the battle must be fought in thought itself, because that is what makes the human creature what it essentially is. As Barth wrote: "With *quo maius cogitari nequit* the enemy (denial or doubt) is sought out on his own ground, in thought itself, on which ground the enemy is repeatedly calling in question the knowledge of God on the assumption of an ontic conception of God, and is placed under the sign of the Name of God and is thereby challenged to necessary knowledge of God."⁹⁷ Or as Hegel put it in the *Science of Logic*: "The genuine refutation must penetrate the opponent's stronghold and meet him on his own ground; no advantage is gained by attacking him somewhere else and defeating him where he is not."⁹⁸

J. We are almost at the end of this chapter. Before returning to the *Kirchlich Dogmatik*, I want to examine the concluding part of Barth's argument in the *FQI*, take a short detour around his treatment of the

⁹⁶ Barth, *Anselms Beweis*, 155; *Anselm's Proof*, 153.

⁹⁷ Barth, *Anselms Beweis*, 91; *Anselm's Proof*, 89.

⁹⁸ G. W. F. Hegel, *Science of Logic* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 581.

speculative theologian, P. K. Marheineke, in *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, and draw some penultimate conclusions concerning the speculative aspect of Barth's theology.

The *FQI* ends with a brief reflection on *Proslogion* 4, which is where Anselm tries to make sense of how it is possible for the fool to say that "God does not exist" when it is logically impossible to deny the existence of God. Barth makes some interesting points about the relationship between language and thought, and what we could call the relationship between the capacity of self-consciousness for abstraction and what Wittgenstein called "language idling."⁹⁹ Essentially, the argument is that the fool is a fool, because he does not know what he is talking about—and yet he insists on making claims and arguments.¹⁰⁰ The overarching point is a familiar one. We do not know what the concept "God" denotes in the abstract. The word only has meaning in a particular encounter and within a particular praxis.

These arguments take us back to important parts of *Romans II*. We do not immediately have any form of knowledge of God. What we mean by

⁹⁹ On the issue of the relationship of thought to language, Barth does not discuss it in great detail, but simply points out that one form of thinking about something is to bring to mind the word or concept that denotes it and loosely map the (logical and grammatical) rules that govern its use. "We can think of an object by thinking of the word that denotes it, that is by obeying the directions which our thinking receives from the sign language of this word and so considering what claims to be the thought of the object concerned" (Barth, *Anselms Beweis*, 166ff; *Anselm's Proof*, 163). A self-conscious knowledge of the rules that govern a concept can take place without, and thus be distinguished from, a self-conscious knowledge of the object itself. This entails that, in principle, we can be thinking in such a way that the words or concepts that we have in mind are completely abstracted from any concrete, practical dealings with the objects or states of affairs that they denote. To be clear, this does not mean that "truth" is independent of the rules that form our concepts. Rather, there is a plastic relationship between the rules that shape our concepts, and a self-conscious knowledge of the object that the concepts denote. Truth involves both. "For the truth of thinking or speaking stands or falls by the relations of its sign language to what exists independently of its signs" (Barth, *Anselms Beweis*, 167; *Anselm's Proof*, 164). Claims made in complete abstraction from any self-conscious knowledge of the relevant objects or states of affairs swerve into the realm of the senseless. As I mentioned, this is what Wittgenstein would call "language idling." The fool's claim that there is no God is just that: language idling.

¹⁰⁰ "What the *insipiens* can prove is this and only this, that he does not know him whose Existence he denies. And it is not his denial, but his not knowing, that constitutes his folly." Barth, *Anselms Beweis*, 171; *Anselm's Proof*, 168. In this sense, we can say that what the fool lacks when making these claims is a central aspect of self-consciousness, since a paramount aspect of being self-conscious is to understand (oneself) what one is actually saying (that "I think" is actually "I think").

the word is and remains arbitrary. On our own, we lack a grasp of the sense of the concept and have no non-arbitrary way to grasp it. We learn that actually grasping both its sense and reference depends solely on the sovereign act of self-revelation of the unconditioned and unsublatable subject of God. In *Romans II*, this revelation consists in the negation of all given apprehensions of the concept “God” formed outside the reading and reflecting praxis, which centered on the biblical scriptures. The sense of “God” is strictly grasped from the encounter with the radical negation of all claims about God that have a source or ground other than those texts and that praxis.

By and large, this goes for the *FQI* as well. Here there is greater leverage for forming and affirming concepts that work at some reflective distance from the biblical texts—although there is no question of forming theological concepts based on alternative sources or grounds. Thus, knowledge

of God is not primarily gained by means of the negation of extra-scriptural discourse about the divine. Rather, the negation of extra-scriptural claims to think or speak sensibly about the divine follows from our knowledge and affirmation of the biblical God. Affirmation precedes negation.

Whatever propositions we are inclined to formulate concerning the nature of God will have a claim to being sensible and true only once we have grasped the form through which we know the self-revealing God. Once the form of our theological knowledge is certain, beyond the possibility of doubt and skepticism, the content of theological knowledge can be sublated and our theological propositions can claim to have purchase—albeit in the analogy of faith, *tanquam in speculo*. God reveals who God is to us, and in so doing informs and sublates our thinking in a particular way, allowing us to form speculative concepts that make the necessity and rationality of God’s self-revelation and God’s revealed essence explicit.

Quoting Barth at some length:

Even if every conceivable physical and moral property were raised to the *n*th degree, that could quite well be nothing more than the sum total of the predicates of a purely conceptual being. The fact that [what God is] is synonymous with God himself makes this analogical, ‘speculative’ understanding of his reality into true knowledge of his Nature and that creates the fully efficacious, indeed over-efficacious substitute for the missing (and necessarily missing) experiential knowledge of him. This in turn compels knowledge of his

Existence, the knowledge which is possible and becomes real so necessarily and so exclusively as against all other knowledge, including all denial and doubt, only in so far as it is knowledge of his Existence...Wherever God has been known, he himself has excluded the very thought of [his non-existence] with mathematical precision, and wherever he is to be known he will continue to exclude it. 'Exclude'—that means turn it into a thought that is impossible, null and void and finished.¹⁰¹

Mixing Hegelian terms with one of Barth's own formulations, we could say that speculative theology is able to achieve this form of "absolute knowledge" precisely because in its thinking it "allows God to be God."¹⁰²

K. We are now able to make a provisional distinction between two forms of "speculation" in theology, reflecting two distinct practices and two distinct forms of self-consciousness. There are several moments where Barth writes quite negatively about abstract "speculation" as opposed to concrete and responsible theological thought. I think we can see what the difference between the positive and the negative form of "speculative" thought amounts to. What Barth opposes is a form of theological reasoning that finds its grounds outside the reading and reflecting praxis, and thus generates "speculative" arguments that cannot be justified or deconstructed by the biblical texts. It rests on a merely subjective choice of premises and grounds, which implies a form of self-consciousness that is not determined by the absolute certainty of the form of the knowledge of God: a free-floating subjectivity without a corresponding object that informs it. This form of "speculation" cannot rightly be said to be knowledge, but appears to be based on arbitrary presentiment and is at the very best categorized as "opinion." It follows that we cannot fully bring it within the objective and intersubjective sphere of the exchange of arguments and reasons.

Over and against this abstract, and ultimately subjective, "speculation" stands Barth's own speculative theology, which he developed in response to some fundamental problems that his early dialectical theology generated: the outstanding issues of affirmation, objectivity, rationality, and self-consciousness. Thus his answers as they appear in the *FQI* form part of his overall response to the challenge that German Idealism poses to theology, and provide a more comprehensive and deliberative response to

¹⁰¹ Barth, *Anselms Beweis*, 170ff; *Anselm's Proof*, 167.

¹⁰² Barth, *Anselms Beweis*, 172; *Anselm's Proof*, 169.

this challenge than he was able (or willing) to give when he wrote *Romans II*. As I have argued in this chapter, this theology shares several distinctive features with Hegel's speculative thought, not least the fact that this form of knowledge is absolute and leaves no room for skepticism or doubt. Anselm's proof, which makes the form of knowledge obtained by us as part of God's self-revelation explicit, excludes the possibility of doubt and skepticism by, among other things, affirming and incorporating the self-conscious rationality of the human subject.

L. In his *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, one of the most appreciative chapters that Barth wrote discusses the great, right-Hegelian and speculative theologian, P. K. Marheineke (1780–1846). In an age when theologians fluctuated between abstract reason and subjective presentiment and feeling, Marheineke stands out, writes Barth, because of his deep concern with truth: “Even in theology, especially in theology—and this is what evidently led him to Hegel and kept him with Hegel—he was concerned with knowing the truth.... However, the truth he meant was divine truth, and therefore—at this point he turns away even from rationalism—not the truth of human reason, not abstract rational truth vacantly confronting its object, but concrete, fulfilled truth, containing its object in itself or being in its object, a knowledge that is no less the knowledge of truth by being the knowledge of faith.”¹⁰³ The formulation equally well describes the spirit that shapes Anselm's theology and Barth's mature work.

Marheineke seeks to carry out this program throughout his dogmatic work and remains committed to a theology that understands itself as assimilating the knowledge bestowed in God's revelation *tanquam in speculo*.¹⁰⁴ Yet, as it turns out, the governing concept in Marheineke's theology becomes the concept of Spirit, which he suggests mediates between the divine and the human realm, serving as a synthesis of thought and being. The question inevitably emerges whether it actually becomes possible to distinguish between the divine and the human in this theology. That this even appears as a potential problem is a sign that Marheineke's theology may very well have gone too far and swerved into the negative form of “speculation” discussed above. For all that, we should note Barth's affirmation of Marheineke's essential insight. As he writes about this great

¹⁰³ Karl Barth, *Die im 19. Jahrhundert*, (Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag AG, Zollikon, 1947), 445; *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century* (London: SCM Press, 2001), 480.

¹⁰⁴ Barth, *Protestantische Theologie*, 445; *Protestant Theology*, 480.

speculative theologian: “It is at least instructive that in the middle of this age these thoughts were thought and thrown into the debate not by one of the many outsiders that were there at the time, but in the closest proximity to Hegelian thought, which so uniquely satisfied the desires of the time. The concept ‘speculative theology’ can indeed also mean that theology, seeing and expressing itself *tanquam in speculo*, has the task of meditating on what has already been thought by God in his word to man. At any rate, this was Marheineke’s intention. But in this sense the church father and the Reformers were also speculative theologians.”¹⁰⁵ In that sense, it follows. If speculative theology is essentially the form of thought that Anselm made explicit, then it is not unique to Marheineke, I. A. Dorner or the other nineteenth-century theologians working in the shadow of German Idealism. Athanasius and Calvin join the ranks. One could therefore argue that we should drop the adjective and say that what I have followed the *FQJ* in calling “speculative theology” is simply theology when done right.

That said, I want to insist that the adjective is not redundant, but serves a descriptive purpose. The difference between the “speculative theologians” that came before the advent of German Idealism and the “speculative theologians” that came after matters. Those who came before did not explicitly confront the same formidable challenge that those who came after faced. Barth himself implicitly acknowledged this in his polemic with Emil Brunner from 1934. There Barth argues that an important aspect of Brunner’s defense of natural theology is predicated on the fact that the Reformers did not address the epistemological aspect of sin as forcefully as they addressed its ethical aspect. “They saw and attacked the possibility of an intellectual work-righteousness in the basis of theological thought. But they did not do so as widely, as clearly and as fundamentally as they did with respect to the possibility of a moral work-righteousness in the basis of Christian life.”¹⁰⁶ By explicitly attacking intellectual work-righteousness in the form of a positive link between our discursive capacities and revelation, Barth is continuing the work of the Reformers. He takes their fight to the ground that they underemphasized, because he is able to see how much hinges on settling the issue of the power and reach of human self-conscious thought. He knows that the issue of the form of knowledge is decisive,

¹⁰⁵ Barth, *Protestantische Theologie*, 446; *Protestant Theology*, 481.

¹⁰⁶ Emil Brunner and Karl Barth, *Natural Theology* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2002), 102.

because leaving room for free-floating subjectivity in theology threatens to turn theological propositions into arbitrary nonsense. Here, it matters very much that he is doing theology in light of the advent of the German Idealists. It matters that Barth and Marheineke and Dorner stand on the same side of this “before and after.” This—along with everything that also goes for the pre-Kantian theologians such as Anselm and Calvin—is what give the predicate “speculative” a particular significance when applied to Barth and his fellow travelers from the nineteenth century.

M. I want to end this chapter by returning to the issue of God’s unsublatable subjectivity, God’s freedom, and God’s being as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This entails returning to where we left off in the *Kirchliche Dogmatik I,1, on the Trinity of God*. Then, in my final chapter, I take up Barth’s Doctrine of God and show how the theology that he learned at the feet of Anselm of Canterbury shapes his speculative theology going forward.

At the risk of sounding repetitive, I remind the reader that one of the essential insights of the *FQI* is the realization that “... it is not possible to think beyond God, not possible to think as a spectator of oneself or of God.”¹⁰⁷ There is no position from which we can “go behind” God’s revelation and apply concepts, norms, or values that have their ground outside the reading and reflecting praxis that plays itself out between *credo* and *Credo*. It follows that the form in which God reveals God’s self cannot be conceived *not* to be the true form of God’s being. As Barth writes in *Kirchliche Dogmatik I,1*, “... God’s essence and work are not twofold but one.”¹⁰⁸ We know that God’s works are divine by their form, although they are also distinct insofar as God’s works are directed towards a reality distinct from God. Nevertheless, the form in which these acts are realized reveals the divine power to act unconditioned by anything else, the power to begin with God’s self and go forth absolutely unconditioned and unhindered. This form of agency, which is both absolutely free and sovereign, is the essence of God—God’s unsublatable subjectivity beyond which we cannot go. Barth writes: “Though the work of God is the essence of God, it is necessary and important to distinguish His essence as such from His work, remembering that this work is grace, a free divine decision, and also remembering that we can know about God only because and to the extent that He gives Himself to be known.”¹⁰⁹ This unconditioned spontaneity or

¹⁰⁷ Barth, *Anselms Beweis*, 172; *Anselm’s Proof*, 169.

¹⁰⁸ Barth, *Dogmatik*, 391; *Dogmatics*, 371.

¹⁰⁹ Barth, *Dogmatik*, 391; *Dogmatics*, 371.

freedom of self-revelation is preserved in all God's works. At no point does God enter into a relationship with us, where the normative sovereignty or autonomy rests with us. As *id quo maius cogitari nequit* or the Triune Father, Son, and Spirit, God remains that which rationally excludes the possibility of penetrating behind or above the freedom of God.

Thus the freedom of God is both the form that provides us with determinate knowledge of God and what reveals the impossibility of fully grasping or comprehending God's eternal being: "This freedom of His is the ground of the distinction of the essence of God as such from His essence as the One who works and reveals Himself. On this freedom rests the *incomprehensibility* of God, the inadequacy of all knowledge of the revealed God. The triunity of God too, is revealed to us only in God's work. This is why the triunity of God is incomprehensible to us.... The comprehensibility with which it is presented to us, primarily in Scripture and secondarily in the Church doctrine of the Trinity, is a creaturely comprehensibility.... In this sphere and within these limits revelation occurs."¹¹⁰ Because we cannot go beyond this form, we cannot conceive of God's essence any differently—but this also entails that we cannot assert a form of knowing mastery when it comes to God's eternal essence. Precisely because this is who God is, we cannot claim to have fully comprehended God. The absolute certainty of the form of knowledge depends on acknowledging this inherent limitation. As such the triune God is and remains *id quo maius cogitari nequit* and not an object like other objects in the world readily available to be comprehended by self-conscious human subjects. "How else could we perceive the triunity except in this sphere and within these limits. Only revelation as God's step towards us is, of course, the guarantee of its truth. As we cannot make the step across the abyss, so we cannot be the guarantee. We can only let it be guaranteed for us. And we should not be surprised at the incomprehensibility in which it still remains for us as it becomes comprehensible to us. We should not confuse our comprehension and its allotted and appropriate truth with the truth of the triunity from which by God's grace it comes to our comprehension as this takes place in us with the appropriate and allotted truth."¹¹¹

With this distinction in mind, I now want to turn in the final chapter of this book to Barth's two dogmatic volumes on the doctrine of God.

¹¹⁰ Barth, *Dogmatik*, 391ff; *Dogmatics*, 371.

¹¹¹ Barth, *Dogmatik*, 392; *Dogmatics*, 371ff.

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Barth's Speculative Theology and the *Kirchliche Dogmatik*

*Now, my soul, rouse and lift up your whole understanding and think as
much as you can on what kind and how great this good is.
Anselm of Canterbury, Proslogion 24*

We are by now approaching the end of this study of the speculative aspect of Karl Barth's theology. I have outlined the basic structure of the argument. I have shown how a particular thought-form that develops in light of the difficult issue introduced by German Idealists successfully redeploys several of their insights within a distinct praxis, theology, and that this enables theology to stand out as an autonomous discipline without neglecting the gains that the Idealists made. Instead, the radical insights and achievement of the Idealists can be seen to have afforded theology the opportunity to achieve greater clarity and precision concerning its own form of conceptual engagement.

The previous chapter was technical, since it considered primarily a technical text, the *FQI*. There, Barth was able to make the logical-dialectical form of the rationality of his theological praxis explicit. Yet, this provides us with only half an argument. Speculative thought is not characterized by being formalistic or overly technical. Instead, it is characterized by a freedom of expression and thought that is grounded in the certainty of the form of knowing. To see Barth's speculative theology unfold, we must, of course, turn to Barth's major work, the *Kirchliche*

Dogmatik. Here, we are best served by leaving the prolegomena behind and entering into the development of theological doctrine in and for itself.

There are obvious limits to how much of a work that is famously over 9000 pages long it is possible to cover. I will limit myself to engaging with the two volumes on the doctrine of God, *Kirchliche Dogmatik II, 1–2*. I will also begin by focusing on the moments in the text when Barth is most explicit about his use of the form of thought developed in the *FQI*. I will then very briefly examine his use of the so-called “speculative theologians,” I. A. Dorner’s work on the immutability of God in particular. Then I examine Barth’s development of the doctrine of divine predestination, which I argue is a paradigm example of how the speculative thought-form leads to radical revisions of traditional doctrine. Finally, I turn to Barth’s strange, but fascinating, account of the beauty of God. I think that the theological reflection on beauty of a reformed theologian will in and of itself be an interesting subject of investigation. Furthermore, it is a moment in Barth’s theology that has received very little attention, and that is a shame. To me it is a high point of his theology that concretely enables us to take a step outside the traditional limits of doctrinal theology and use its particular framework to see the various objects of the world, and even the world itself, in a different light. Thus I end this book with a sideways glance at a form of aesthetics that can give visual expression to the central insights of Karl Barth’s speculative theology.

THE DOCTRINE OF GOD

A. We have seen how the overshadowing challenge facing any theology lies in attempting to understand how to use the word “God” correctly. The theologian needs to show how we know that we are not swerving off into fantasy, where our statements are “... left in the air like empty sounds” when we speak of God.¹ How do we know that our doctrinal claims not only make sense, but are directed at some actuality that determines their truth-value?

In Chap. 5, we saw how Barth engages this challenge. He does not engage it by invoking an immediate experience of God. Neither our own experience nor being, when “properly construed,” can serve on its own as

¹Karl Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik II,1* (Zollikon: Evangelischer Verlag AG., 1958), 1; *Church Dogmatics II,1* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), 4.

a path or bridge to the right way to speak of God. We discovered, rather, that as we engage with the biblical texts as the witness to revelation and make their immanent structure and rationality explicit, we come to know how meaningfully to use the word “God,” and thus gain actual, concrete knowledge of how to distinguish and follow the rules that shape a meaningful theological discourse. Furthermore, the form that this knowledge takes is as certain as any form of knowledge can be. In short, we saw how actual knowledge of God is realized.

This is where Barth begins *Kirchliche Dogmatik II,1*. In “The Fulfillment of the Knowledge of God” he writes: “In the doctrine of God we have to learn what we are saying when we say ‘God.’ In the doctrine of God we have to learn to say ‘God’ in the correct sense.”² As we have seen, Barth discovered the essential, logical framework of this form of knowledge in his work on Anselm’s proof. As Barth writes at the very beginning of *Kirchliche Dogmatik II,1*: “I believe I learned the fundamental attitude to the problem of the knowledge and existence of God which is adopted in this section—and indeed the whole chapter—from Anselm of Canterbury, and in particular from his proofs of God set out in *Prosl. 2–4*. May I therefore ask the reader to keep that text in mind, and to allow me to refer to my book *Fides quaerens intellectum: Anselms Beweis der Existenz Gottes* (1931), for an understanding of it.”³ Barth begins the first explicitly doctrinal part of his *Kirchliche Dogmatik* by arguing that the beginning of wisdom when it comes to learning how to use the word “God” meaningfully, correctly, is reading Anselm of Canterbury’s proof of the existence of God in the *Proslogion*—as he did in the *FQI*. Until now we have certainly been on the right track.

B. The first aspect that Barth seizes on when he begins his more comprehensive and explicitly doctrinal take on the speculative insight of the *FQI* is the way the affirmation of God entails the unequivocal negation of doubt. As in the treatment of the doctrine of the Trinity in the prolegomena volumes of his dogmatic, he first stresses that the theologian is precluded from occupying a subjective position from which one can autonomously determine the value of God’s revelation. Such a position precludes taking a stance outside the concrete knowledge that revelation mediates, and which draws us into a logic of affirmation, shaping the form of our theory and praxis.

² Barth, *Dogmatik II,1*, 1; *Dogmatics II*, 1, 3.

³ Barth, *Dogmatik II,1*, 2; *Dogmatics II*, 1, 4.

Again, what is precluded is a particular aspect of the subjective capacity for abstraction: “The *in abstracto* and *a priori* question of the possibility of the knowledge of God presupposes the existence of a place outside the knowledge of God itself from which this knowledge can be judged. It presupposes a place where, no doubt, the possibility of knowledge in general and of the knowledge of God in particular can be judged and decided in one way or another. It presupposes the existence of a theory of knowledge as a hinterland where consideration of truth, worth and competence of the Word of God, on which the knowledge of God is grounded, can for a time at least be suspended.”⁴ This theory of knowledge presupposes an empty space of complete arbitrariness—a normative and conceptual void—as the ultimate court of appeal available to the human knower. In short, it presupposes that a particular (highly abstract) form of the autonomous human subject is the final arbiter of all truth and value.

Now Barth’s argument in light of the *FQI* is that we can see how the capacity thus construed violates the purpose of abstraction, when it posits a measure by which to judge the truth or value of God’s revelation. Our capacity for abstracting is useful in so far as it opens up a space wherein we can reason and analyze what makes sense to think or do by determining whether it conflicts with other things we know or desire. That is, it is useful insofar as the space it opens creates room for the application of the principle of non-contradiction to sort out our situation and choices. When the capacity for abstraction is exercised for the purpose of determining the truth or value of God’s revelation it conflicts with the form of the knowledge of God and is immediately in contradiction with its purpose. Not using this capacity would in this case be an exercise of our reasonable nature. Using it is a violation of our self-conscious rationality.

Thus Barth writes: “The only legitimate and meaningful questions in this context are: how far is God known? And how far is God knowable? These questions are legitimate and meaningful because they are genuine questions of Church proclamation, and therefore also genuine questions of dogmatics—genuine objects of its formal and material task.”⁵ This is so, because the concept of God is meaningful only as a determinate concept, where the determination of the concept is understood as God’s self-determination. In other words, only if God reveals the rules for using the

⁴ Barth, *Dogmatik II*, 1, 3; *Dogmatics II*, 1, 5.

⁵ Barth, *Dogmatik II*, 1, 3; *Dogmatics II*, 1, 5.

concept “God” do those rules cease to be arbitrary.⁶ “The knowledge of God with which we are here concerned takes place, not in a free choice, but with a definite constraint. It stands or falls with its one definite object, which cannot be different and which cannot be exchanged for or even joined with any other object.”⁷ If there is a position outside or above the supposed knowledge of God that effectively calls into question the knowledge of God, and produce anxiety or doubt in the believer, then that is proof that the supposed knowledge turned out not to be knowledge of God after all. As simple—even simpleminded—as that may sound, it follows straightforwardly from the knowledge obtained in the revelation of the Triune God, above which nothing greater can be conceived. “True knowledge of God is not and cannot be attacked; it is without anxiety and without doubt. But only that which is fulfilled under the constraint of God’s Word is such a true knowledge of God. Any escape out of the constraint of the Word of God means a crossing over to false gods and no-gods. And this will show itself by leading inevitably to uncertainty in the knowledge of God, and therefore to doubt.”⁸ There is no space for an arbitrary choice or determination in theology—just as there is no space for a *sacrificium intellectus*.

We should note that Barth clearly considers the “theological” appeal to a sacrifice of the intellect or abandonment of rationality to be the necessary result of positing a form of indeterminacy or arbitrariness in theological reasoning.⁹ The rules for using the concept of God have a necessity that is determined in advance, prior to our self-conscious reflections, and are there to be followed and thus understood rationally—or the whole thing disintegrates into arbitrary nonsense.

C. One of the principal insights the *FQI* offers concerns the issue of affirmation and counter-factual thought in relation to the knowledge of God. Because there is no room for doubt, as the possibility of applying external norms to the knowledge of God is precluded, the affirmation of God turns out to be unconditional. This entails that counterfactually toying with the thought that God could not have existed or may have existed

⁶ “... The fulfilling of the knowledge of God with which we are concerned most certainly does not rest on a free choice of this or that object, of this or that ‘God’ [*dieses oder jenes ‘Gottes’*]. It must be established at once from the knowledge of God with which we are concerned that everything that is described as ‘God’ on the basis of a free choice cannot possibly be God ...” Barth, *Dogmatik II*, 1, 5; *Dogmatics II*, 1, 5/6.

⁷ Barth, *Dogmatik II*, 1, 5; *Dogmatics II*, 1, 7.

⁸ Barth, *Dogmatik II*, 1, 5ff; *Dogmatics II*, 1, 7.

⁹ Barth, *Dogmatik II*, 1, 6–8; *Dogmatics II*, 1, 7–9.

otherwise than the way God is known is precluded. This straightforwardly applies to the form of the knowledge of God as Triune. Barth writes: “In [God’s] triune life as such, objectivity, and with it knowledge, is divine reality before creaturely objectivity and knowledge exists. We call this the primary objectivity of God, and distinguish it from the secondary, i.e., the objectivity which He has for us too in His revelation, in which He gives Himself to be known by us as He knows Himself.”¹⁰ The unsublatable subjectivity of God, wherein God remains sovereign in all modes of revelation, is an affirmation of the inner, triune life of God in a form suitable to be known by his creatures. As we saw at the end of the last chapter, we can recognize our own limitation in this encounter, and thus recognize that we cannot fully conceive of God as God conceives of God, but we are prohibited from counterfactually musing on whether God might be conceived as other than the Triune Lord.¹¹ That would entail a hypothetical negation of God’s existence as revealed in its freedom and sovereignty.

Barth writes: “His secondary objectivity is fully true, for it has its correspondence and basis in His primary objectivity. God does not have to be untrue to Himself and deceive us about His real nature in order to become objective to us. For first to Himself, and then in His revelation to us, He is nothing but what He is in Himself. It is here that the door is shut against any ‘non-objective’ knowledge of God. As such it would not be knowledge of God. God is Himself objective.”¹² This also entails an acknowledgment of the way that God’s secondary objectivity through which God is known to us cannot be deemed insufficient or lacking. It is the right form of knowledge for beings such as us, and it mediates actual knowledge of God, which immediately disintegrates into fantasy and fancy, if one tries to go beyond it. As self-conscious subjects, we can conceive of ourselves and our relationship to God as different by counterfactually negating our own existence and thinking away the world, but we cannot conceive of God in any other way than how God is known in God’s revelation. The essential freedom and thus aseity of God, which determines the form of our knowledge of God, can only be affirmed, and never negated.

It is precisely this insight that enables Barth to engage in his own form of counterfactual speculation throughout the *Kirchliche Dogmatik*. Throughout he feels free to consider what would follow if we subtract

¹⁰ Barth, *Dogmatik II,1*, 15ff; *Dogmatics II,1*, 16.

¹¹ Barth, *Dogmatik II,1*, 52ff; *Dogmatics II,1*, 49.

¹² Barth, *Dogmatik II,1*, 16; *Dogmatics II,1*, 16.

ourselves from the picture as knowing subjects. As Barth explains in "The Being of God in Act": "God is who He is in His works. He is the same even in Himself, even before and after and over His works, and without them. They are bound to Him, but He is not bound to them. They are nothing without him. But He is who He is, even without them. He is who He is not only in His works. Yet in Himself He is not another than He is in His works. In light of what He is in His works it is no longer an open question what He is in Himself, such that He might be something else or something entirely different or not be at all."¹³ A genuine understanding of God's necessary being opens up this far-reaching possibility for thought: speculative theology can, without transgressing its limits and its strict obedience to God's revelation, speak sensibly about the very depths of God's being independently of God's relation to creation.

D. These acknowledgments shape the human self-conscious subject in a particular way. The believer encounters a certain conceptual imperative that reshapes the understanding of the coordinates of possible knowledge and thought. While it opens up the possibility of conceiving of God as necessarily existing in such a way that we can sensibly talk about how God would have existed had the world never been created, there is also a determinate restriction on what we can say about ourselves as knowers. We can no longer think of ourselves and our conceptual capacities as absolutely unconditioned. Our thinking is formed within a sphere determined and defined as the realm of the creature as opposed to the truly unconditioned domain of God.

In other words, the knowledge gained in revelation reshapes our self-consciousness *as creatures*. Or, put differently, knowledge of the creator re-creates the self-consciousness of the creature. Precisely by not being something we can immediately tell ourselves, the knowledge of revelation and grace is creative. "Knowledge of God is thus not the relationship of an already existing subject to an object that enters into his sphere and is therefore obedient to the laws of this sphere. On the contrary, this knowledge first of all creates the subject of its knowledge by coming into the creature."¹⁴ Here we encounter another aspect of the logic of affirmation that shapes Barth's later theology. The believing subject is drawn into an affirmative form of thought that proceeds from God outward or

¹³ Barth, *Dogmatik II,1*, 291; *Dogmatics II,1*, 260.

¹⁴ Barth, *Dogmatik II,1*, 22; *Dogmatics II,1*, 21.

downward.¹⁵ The reflecting creature is drawn into an intellectual form of proclamation, and through this form of proclamation a new shape of self-conscious subjectivity emerges.

In ethical or moral terms, we can describe this subjectivity as a form of obedience to and gratitude for the self-revelation of God. As we saw in the *FQI*, there is a form of prohibition or negativity at work once we think through the radical character of the affirmation. That negativity finds practical expression in the realization of various virtues, such as obedience, humility, and gratitude. Barth therefore argues that when the creature thinks through the prohibition implicitly entailed in the thought of the Trinity or the *id quo maius cogitari nequit*, the acknowledgment of its rational force as binding turns the creature into an obedient covenant partner of God. Barth writes: “In this act God posits Himself as our object and ourselves as those who know Him. But the fact that He does so means that our knowing God can consist only in our following this act, in ourselves becoming a correspondence of this act, in ourselves and our whole existence and therefore our considering and conceiving becoming the human act corresponding to the divine act.”¹⁶ Through God’s revelation the believer is brought into an intellectual equivalent of the covenantal relationship.

This relationship between Creator and creature underscores that speculative theology is a thoroughly human form of knowing, which does not overstep the creaturely sphere, but practically places the creaturely sphere in relation to the sphere of God in our thought. Barth writes: “The veracity of the revelation of God verifies itself by verily laying claim to the thinking and speaking of man. Our thinking, which is executed in views and concepts [*Anschauungen und Begriffen*], is our responsibility to ourselves. Our speech is our responsibility to others. In this twofold responsibility—and this is how the veracity of the revelation of God verifies itself—we are verily claimed by it.”¹⁷ We can hear the echoes of the distinction between the *credo* and the *Credo* from the *FQI*. It is within this twofold discursive responsibility as self-conscious creatures that theology is worked out as a theory and praxis that is rational through and through. The revelation of God does not violate this sphere of creaturely rationality, but shows us how we can actually come to live as responsible self-conscious agents. We gain a new awareness of when we begin to speak irresponsibly or, that is, swerve into nonsense.

¹⁵ Barth, *Dogmatik II,1*, 55 *Dogmatics II,1*, 51.

¹⁶ Barth, *Dogmatik II,1*, 27; *Dogmatics II,1*, 26.

¹⁷ Barth, *Dogmatik II,1*, 237; *Dogmatics II,1*, 211.

E. I have already mentioned the special relationship that exists between the form of Barth's speculative theology and the freedom of God. I will now turn to Barth's explicit treatment of the freedom of God, where he also provides some important context for his use of Anselm's proof.

We have seen how Barth presents the entire fifth chapter of the *Kirchliche Dogmatik* on "The Knowledge of God" as a less formal and more dogmatically rich version of Anselm's argument in *Proslogion* 2–4. Certainly, reading the two texts next to each other is both interesting and enlightening, since several lines of thought are spelled out and given more flesh. That said, Barth rarely refers to Anselm's proof in the text itself. It is in its entirety and in the general form of its argument that we can recognize its influence. It is therefore interesting that Barth explicitly returns to Anselm's proof a few pages later in the volume, namely in the section on "The Being of God in Freedom."

Barth argues that the essence of God is to be the one who loves in freedom. It spells out what it means to be able to use the word "God" meaningfully in light of God's self-revelation, that is, what it means that "God is God."¹⁸ Here freedom and love are the essential determinations of God's being, the aspects of God that we cannot think away without negating the being of God.¹⁹ Very roughly, the love of God is expressed in the divine act of revelation. As Barth puts it: "... God is He who, without having to do so, seeks and creates fellowship between Himself and us. He does not have to do it, because in Himself without us, and therefore without this, He has that which He seeks and creates between Himself and us. It implies so to speak an overflow of His essence that He turns to us."²⁰ Who God reveals God to be in Jesus Christ is overflowing love that seeks out the other to establish fellowship. God includes the creature in the love that is first and foremost God's own self-relation and self-affirmation, albeit in a way that is in accordance with the capacities and nature of the creature.

¹⁸ Barth, *Dogmatik II,1*, 306; *Dogmatics II,1*, 273.

¹⁹ "The fact that He makes Himself visible in this name is the solution to the tautology. From this name we have to conclude what and how He is in His act and therefore in His being: what is divine, what is the character of Him who is God, what makes God God, what therefore His 'essence' is. The fact that we cannot go behind His livingness for a definition of His being means in fact that we cannot go behind this name of His, because in the very revelation of His name there occurs the act which is His being to all eternity." Barth, *Dogmatik II,1*, 306; *Dogmatics II,1*, 273.

²⁰ Barth, *Dogmatik II,1*, 307; *Dogmatics II,1*, 273.

God's freedom is more closely aligned with the singularity or even aseity of God. Where love is the expression of God's overflowing grace and turns to the world by making God's self known, God's freedom expresses the depth of God's divinity.²¹ Now addressing the depth and the singularity of God could be thought to undermine our actual knowledge of God, in that it concerns God's radical independence from the entire sphere of creation.²² God's depth is God's absolutely unconditioned and sovereign being, which relies on nothing other than God. Yet, as we just saw, this does not present a problem for Barth. His theology is rationally structured around the possibility of doing just that.

Quoting Barth at some length:

With the concept [*Begriff*] of freedom we simply affirm what we would be affirming if we were to characterize God as the Lord. But His lordship is in all circumstances the lordship of His living and loving. Our present question is that the mode of His lordship and therefore His living and loving—of the divine characteristics by which as He who lives and loves, He manifests His sovereignty. This mode is characterized by the fact that it is absolutely God's own, in no sense dictated to Him from outside and conditioned by no higher necessity than that of His own choosing and deciding, willing and doing. If we enquire how, according to His revelation in Jesus Christ, God's lordship differs in its divinity from other types of rule, then we must answer that it is lordship in freedom.²³

God's freedom gives expression to the way the divinity of God always exceeds, anticipates, and confines the creaturely sphere. We could say that the affirmation of God's freedom is what most clearly brings out God's singularity and thus the negative and critical aspect of Barth's speculative theology. Being able to think of God's singularity in this way is the condition, *sine qua non*, of meaningful talk about *God* and thus also what prevents it from degenerating into a form of anthropology.

Freedom is a dialectical concept *par excellence*, and this is also the case in Barth's speculative theology, where it is developed in a singular and fascinating way. It is both the form in which God is free to enter into a relationship with God's creature without compromising the creature or God, and—precisely in this—also what cements the distinction between these

²¹ Barth, *Dogmatik II,1*, 334ff; *Dogmatics II,1*, 297ff.

²² Barth, *Dogmatik II,1*, 335; *Dogmatics II,1*, 298.

²³ Barth, *Dogmatik II,1*, 338ff; *Dogmatics II,1*, 301.

two radically distinct agents.²⁴ God is free to allow the human creature to apprehend God's self-revelation according to the possibilities and form of humanity's knowledge. In other words, the entire movement of love, which proceeds from God towards the human creature in God's revelation, takes place within the freedom of God. Although such a claim would need serious qualification, one could argue that love is the content and freedom is the form of the divine act in God's revelation.

We can stress the formal aspect of freedom, because at this point Barth invokes the proof of the existence of God. The absolute and unconditioned spontaneity of God, wherein God begins with God's own being, needing nothing else to realize God's ends, is also the form in which God proves God's existence as God to us. God "... shows and proves in His revelation His freedom to begin with Himself."²⁵ The entire history of the relationship between God and humanity as witnessed in the biblical scriptures takes place within this freedom. The full revelation of God's freedom is in the incarnation and culmination of the life of Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection. This we already knew from *Romans II*. Nonetheless, the spontaneity with which God is always able to begin with God's self is foreshadowed in all the biblical acts of God.

God's spontaneity is that beyond which we cannot go and that above which we cannot think or imagine anything else. With these formulations we return to the very first meditations on the biblical scriptures from 1917, "The New World in the Bible," where the history of God's acts sets a limit to our conceptual autonomy. The difference is that now Barth can freely speak about formal and rational proof. Barth writes: "It is from first to last the freedom with which He proves His own existence, the proof which every human proof of His existence can only repeat if it is really to prove God's existence and not something very different, that is, in the last resort not to prove the existence of man from the awareness of his own limitations."²⁶

Anselm taught us how the biblical manifestations of God's unconditional sovereignty could be conceptually mediated, as the theologian thinks through the revelation of God in the Bible from the position of the

²⁴ "... [It is His freedom] not merely to be in the differentiation of His being from its being, but to be in Himself the One who can have and hold communion with this reality, as in fact He does, in spite of His utter distinction from it" (Barth, *Dogmatik II,1*, 342; *Dogmatics II,1*, 304).

²⁵ Barth, *Dogmatik II,1*, 342; *Dogmatics II,1*, 304.

²⁶ Barth, *Dogmatik II,1*, 342; *Dogmatics II,1*, 304ff.

single reflecting believer within the inter-subjective community of other believers in the Church. Thus Anselm could develop a legitimate speculative theology that could reflect on the depths of God without transgressing the radical distinction between creature and Creator.

Since it sums up an essential aspect of my argument in this book, I will quote Barth at some length:

That it fulfills this condition is the peculiar excellence of the—falsely so-called and as a result permanently misunderstood—ontological proof of God's existence by Anselm of Canterbury (*Prosl.* 2–4). Anselm halted on the very frontier of the great Neo-Platonic error of a God whose being consists only in a hypostatized summary of His non-being in relation to all other kinds of being, a God who is certainly conceivable as an idealization of man, but whose objective existence can only be demonstrated by sophisms. On the very brink of this error he proved the existence of God by the fact that God has demonstrated and does and will demonstrate Himself. For (deserving our gratitude and answering prayer) He constitutes Himself the point of departure which no thought can by-pass or elude, and with which all thought must begin. In this event of His self-demonstration God is He *quo maius cogitari nequit*. By His holy name, not only His non-existence but even the thought of His non-existence is excluded. Such an error is forbidden man by the fact that God has given Himself to be the object of man's awareness and at the same time has illuminated man's mind to grasp this object.²⁷

The depth of God is the freedom of God, God's unconditioned spontaneity, which allows God always and everywhere to realize God's ways *sui generis*. When the theologian starts to think from the revelation of *this unsublatable subjectivity of God*, a form of reflection emerges that cannot be circumvented, judged, or evaluated by external standards. Our thought follows a movement that emerges from out of itself and is unconditional in its self-affirmation. This brings the theologian into a logic of unconditional affirmation of God's freedom and love. A speculative theology that itself becomes a form of worship.

In fact, this understanding of the freedom of God and the form of Anselm's proof express the same thing. In other words, if we want to understand what we mean by the freedom of God, we should look to how our thoughts are practically shaped by the Anselmic proof, when we

²⁷ Barth, *Dogmatik II,1*, 343; *Dogmatics II,1*, 305.

actively think it through. Everything that follows from the “definition” of God as the one *id quo maius cogitari nequit* also follows from the proper understanding of the freedom of God and *vice versa*. Barth writes: “The freedom in which He proves His existence is the freedom of God in His revelation. And the freedom to exist which He exercises in his revelation is the same which He has in the depth of His eternal being, and which is proper to Him quite apart from His exercise of it *ad extra*. He who begins in this way with Himself in His revelation is He who begins with Himself from eternity, and therefore the One who properly and necessarily exists. And the fact that He is this is what we mean by God’s being in freedom.”²⁸

Now we can see why this form of theological knowledge is necessarily speculative. As already discussed, it is essential that the form of knowledge of God is fully realized and that, in this realization, there is no room for doubt. In other words, we absolutely know what it is to know God and the attempt to circumvent this form of knowing or to argue that there is another more perfect form that we need to achieve is a lessening and rejection of the knowledge itself. It is essential that this “absolute form of knowing” rests on the acknowledgment of the freedom of God. As certain as the form is, it is not static. It is open and plastic, since the form of thought cannot determine its object in advance, but is empowered to follow it and continuously reflect the necessary implications of its manifestations without ever asserting comprehensive mastery. This combination of an inherently open and experimental form of thought that is free from doubt, is practical, rigorous, and worked out in light of a post-Kantian insight into the power of self-consciousness is a speculative theology in the positive sense of the concept. A “speculative theology” that would try by its own power to circumvent this understanding of the freedom of God and of theological thought would immediately be open to doubt and questioning—and its form therefore would not be absolute and, therefore, not speculative in a meaningful sense.

F. One of the most interesting parts of “Being of God in Freedom” is that Barth insists on drawing the full implications of these insights and pushing them as far as they can go. We can see this in his gradual radicalization of his argument and his twofold explicit insistence on taking it even further.²⁹

²⁸ Barth, *Dogmatik II,1*, 343; *Dogmatics II,1*, 305.

²⁹ Barth, *Dogmatik II,1*, 353, 355; *Dogmatics II,1*, 314, 315.

This is an expression of the logic of affirmation that I have argued shapes his speculative theology. The impossibility of not affirming God's freedom, sovereignty, and being entails extending our inferences and conclusions as far as they can go—further than we might initially have thought possible, permissible, or comfortable. As we have seen again and again, the theologian is engaged in a singular form of thought where a particular form of negation is precluded. As Barth points out with a classic Anselmic formulation "... He differentiates His being from what He is not, His existence from His non-existence, and even from the very thought of His non-existence."³⁰ The theologian cannot set the limits—that would be arbitrary and immediately cast the discipline into the sphere of subjective fancy. Barth: "What we say is that the mode of existence is proper to Him which is exempt from any limitation by the possibility of its non-existence. By existing in this way He is not subject to any necessity, as though He must first exist in order to be who He is. But by His existence He simply reaffirms Himself. It is not that He needs to reaffirm Himself, but that, being who He is, He does *in fact* reaffirm Himself and His existence [*sich selbst und damit seine Existenz faktisch bestätigt*]."³¹ The way Barth makes use of freedom as the being of God is remarkable. He develops the concept such that it effectively becomes synonymous with the form of divinity. It is both the form of God's aseity and what guarantees the truth and certainty of God's self-revelation, insofar as God's self-affirmation in this act of revelation is unconditional. Once again toying with the form of the tautology (or infinite judgment as Hegel would have it), it is the form of God's being *as God*.³²

Here we need to make another distinction to counter the appearance of arbitrary speculation that is not grounded in the praxis of reading and rereading the biblical texts. As we have seen, we come to knowledge of God's freedom first through an unreserved affirmation of God's being and secondly through a negation of the thought of anything that might restrict, limit, or condition it. It is important to make this distinction, because the negative approach, by which we subtract or abstract from all

³⁰ Barth, *Dogmatik II,1*, 345; *Dogmatics II,1*, 306.

³¹ Barth, *Dogmatik II,1*, 344; *Dogmatics II,1*, 306.

³² "[I]f God is, it is the effect of His freedom, which knows no necessity, no inevitability, no straitness. The fact that He is ... does, of course settle the fact that He exists *and does not not exist*. He cannot even not exist. He cannot even be thought not to exist [*dass er ist und also nicht nicht ist, ja nicht einmal nicht sein kann, ja also nicht-seiend nicht einmal gedacht werden kann*]" (Barth, *Dogmatik II,1*, 345; *Dogmatics II,1*, 307).

possible conditions or determinations, might simply be a projection of the form of abstract autonomy that immediately comes packed with our self-conscious subjectivity. Barth: “Absolute being purged from all subservience to outward conditions may easily signify, as we have seen, the kind of being that we would gladly ascribe to ourselves, and can actually do so with some uncertainty and indefiniteness, in the form of ‘pure actuality.’”³³ To distinguish between our projection of an ideal image of our most abstract form of subjectivity and the freedom of God, we need to keep the order of knowledge in mind.

As we saw in Chap. 5, the negation follows from the prior affirmation and expresses a way in which we come to understand the full conceptual consequences of God’s unsublatable subjectivity. As in Anselm’s proof the negation of the possibility of conceiving of anything negating or conditioning *id quo maius cogitari nequit* drives a particular form of thought *ad absurdum*. The actual positive formulation precedes this explicitly formal reflection. Thus Barth can reuse the somewhat clunky terminology of the “ontic” and the “noetic” from the *FQI* to make his point: “[B]ehind this noetic absoluteness of God there stands decisively His ontic absoluteness. This is decisive because in God’s revelation it is really a question of His ontic absoluteness from which His noetic absoluteness inevitably follows. God’s freedom in relation to all that is not God signifies that He is distinct from everything, that He is self-sufficient and independent in relation to it, and that He is so in a peculiar and pre-eminent fashion—as no created being confronts any other.”³⁴ As we know, it is this primary, affirmative freedom that characterizes God’s being *a se*, and which allows us to engage in the counterfactual reflections that are expressed in the subtraction or abstraction from anything other than God. Anything else could be conceived not to exist or to exist differently, but God’s singular being cannot *not* be affirmed.

This entails that God is free to affirm God’s Godhead in a series of instances, modes, and relationships that—if they were affirmed of any other being—might appear contradictory. From the height of sovereignty, lordship, and creation to the form of a rejected victim of torture and death, God is and remains God.³⁵ It is precisely this unconditional unity

³³ Barth, *Dogmatik II,1*, 346; *Dogmatics II,1*, 308.

³⁴ Barth, *Dogmatik II,1*, 350; *Dogmatics II,1*, 311.

³⁵ “He is free to maintain as God His distance from the creature and equally free to enter into partnership with it, indeed, to lift the creature itself, in the most vigorous sense, into

and freedom in every self-affirmation that grounds the form in which we achieve knowledge of God. That is the essence of the biblical witness to God's being, which has its ultimate expression in Jesus Christ through whom this primary, affirmative freedom is revealed: "This is how He meets us in Jesus Christ. His revelation in Jesus Christ embraces all these apparently so diverse and contradictory possibilities. They are all *His* possibilities. If we deny Him any one of them, we are denying Jesus Christ and God Himself. Instead of recognizing and adoring God, we are setting up an idol. For we are imposing upon Him—in defiance of the freedom which He has actually proved to us—a bondage which can be only that of our own self-will that would like to deny God and put itself in the place of God."³⁶

That we cannot not affirm God in all the various modes in which God engages with the world in the biblical texts enables us to form an idea of the unity of God. This notion of unity is the same as we found in "The New World in the Bible" and in *Romans II*. It is grounded in the way the texts shape our concepts and bring us into the form of thought and reasoning that I have been mapping throughout my treatment of Barth. It is the form of a speculative *theology* emerging from out of the reading praxis—as opposed to arbitrary "speculation" that is "grounded" in an abstract capacity of a free-floating subjectivity. As Barth writes: "When we say this, we are not speculating. On the contrary, it would be speculation, an illegitimate simplification, a dishonoring of God, not to say this, seeing it is stated so unambiguously in God's revelation."³⁷ It is precisely the fact that we—in light of our own rational capacities—are driven to affirm the unity of God unconditionally in ways that express a necessity beyond our immediate comprehension that distinguishes a positive form of speculative theology from speculation conceived as mere "opinion," where our own subjective inclinations can shape our conceptions.

G. Here, we explicitly return to a theme that we left at the end of Chap. 4. There we saw how Barth could criticize his earlier theology for not

unity with His own divine being, with Himself. God is free to rule over the world in supreme majesty and likewise to serve in the world as the humblest and meanest of servants, free even to be despised in the world, and rejected by the world. God is free to clothe Himself with the life of the world in all its glory as with a garment; but free likewise Himself to die the death which symbolizes the end of all things earthly, in utter abandonment and darkness" (Barth, *Dogmatik II,1*, 354; *Dogmatics II,1*, 315).

³⁶ Barth, *Dogmatik II,1*, 354; *Dogmatics II,1*, 315 (Barth's emphasis).

³⁷ Barth, *Dogmatik II,1*, 355; *Dogmatics II,1*, 316.

being sufficiently “Christological” in the same text in which he mentions the importance of the *FQI* on his development. We have seen how Barth proceeds from his critical, “Christological” discoveries in *Romans II* to the logic of affirmation in the *FQI*. The doctrine of the Trinity, which gives shape to the theology that Barth develops in light of Anselm’s proof, is strictly derived from the revelation of God in the *obedientia passiva* and death of Jesus Christ in the biblical texts—as are all of Barth’s profound insights concerning the freedom and aseity of God. Now it is time to examine how this logic of unconditional affirmation comes to reshapes Barth’s Christology in turn.

At the end of “The Being of God in Freedom,” Barth developed the aseity and freedom of God as far as it can legitimately go, which is quite far. As he has thought through the aseity of God and counterfactually reflected on God’s freedom as God’s independence from Creation, he knows that he is at the outer edges of what he can affirm—although he also knows that saying anything less would be a sign of subjective fancy and imposition. He thus ends the section by explicitly invoking the Christology that grounds all his reflections. His final point is, as one would expect, lovely: “[God] is free. Because this is the case, we must say expressly in conclusion that the freedom of God is the freedom which consists and fulfills itself in His Son Jesus Christ. In Him God has loved Himself from all eternity. In Him He has loved the world. He has done so in Him, in the freedom which renders His life divine, and therefore glorious, triumphant, and strong to save.”³⁸ This is a good place from which to turn to Barth’s famous doctrine of Election from *Kirchlich Dogmatik II,2*.

H. Here I begin by taking Barth at his word, when he discusses his reformulation of the doctrine of Election in the preface to *Kirchlich Dogmatik II,2*: “To think of the contents of this volume gives me much pleasure, but even greater anxiety. The work has this peculiarity, that in it I have had to leave the framework of the theological tradition to a far greater extent than in the first part on the doctrine of God. I would have preferred to follow Calvin’s doctrine of predestination much more closely, instead of departing from it so radically ... But I could not and cannot do so.”³⁹ I submit that this statement reflects more than mere trepidation about how his revision will be received. It also expresses the way in which

³⁸ Barth, *Dogmatik II,1*, 361; *Dogmatics II,1*, 321.

³⁹ Karl Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik II,2* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1980), viii; *Church Dogmatics II,2* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2004), x.

the logic of affirmation shapes Barth's theology in ways that he could not predict and did not necessarily desire himself. I am inclined to take it seriously when Barth writes that he truly wished to be closer to Calvin but could not. Thus the "could not" is not merely an expression of subjective preference or inclination. It is forced on him by the logic of revelation as it determines and shapes his thinking. Departing from this would be departing from the biblical texts and thus from theology itself. It would be departing from deep and hard-won insights into the form of theological reasoning.⁴⁰

Essentially, the reformulation of the doctrine of election is the most recognizable and radical result of the rigorous speculative theology that Barth has found himself developing. It continues the project of mapping the meaningful use of the name, "God." As we saw above, what Barth wrote about God's aseity was grounded in knowledge of God strictly mediated by God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ. What he was able to say about God's freedom was far reaching. To ward off the appearance of abstraction or subjective imposition, Barth shows how the doctrine of God's election in Jesus Christ provides the ground for our thoughts about God's freedom and aseity, and thus banishes all appeals to a hidden "god," floating around somewhere outside the objectivity of our knowledge of God's self-revelation and self-determination. Barth: "We should still not have learned to say 'God' correctly (i.e., as understood in the Christian Church on the basis of Holy Scripture) if we thought it enough simply to say 'God.' However well grounded or critical our utterance, if it has a logical exclusiveness, if it is only 'God,' it will not suffice. For if it is true that in Jesus Christ dwells the fullness of the Godhead bodily (Col. 2,9), then in all the perfection with which it is differentiated from everything that is not God, and thus exists for itself, the Subject God still cannot, as it were, be envisaged, established and described only in and for itself."⁴¹ This cannot but give shape to a new form of the doctrine of election, where God's self-affirmation in Jesus Christ precludes any conception of God as not existing or existing differently. It is the primordial free act in which God proves God's self.

This does not mean that we cannot find the seeds of this form of thought already present at the beginning of Barth's theological development. The doctrine of Election draws us back to the mystery of God, to

⁴⁰ Barth, *Dogmatik II*, 2, 1ff; *Dogmatics II*, 2, 3ff.

⁴¹ Barth, *Dogmatik II*, 2, 3ff; *Dogmatics II*, 2, 5.

the depths and freedom of the divine being, which radically exceeds our comprehension. It takes us back to the limits of our capacities. It is perhaps the principal divine act that underscores how God is that above which nothing greater can be conceived, beyond and above which we cannot go. Thus, in the first preliminary pages that open his great reformulation, we find strong echoes of the essential point from “The New World in the Bible”: “The will of God knows no Wherefore? It is an absolute Therefore, the ultimate Therefore of all.”⁴²

Although these echoes from the early work are clear, it is remarkable to see how Barth reframes his invocation of the “Therefore!,” which sets a limit to the power of our self-conscious subjectivity. In the early text, it had the character of a “brute halt.” In the *Kirchliche Dogmatik II,2* the passage underscores Barth’s affirmation of reason and his explicit consciousness that it would be deeply problematic if theology appeared to do violence to our rational capacities. This is important for my overall argument about Barth’s development, so I quote him at some length:

We must recognize the sovereignty of God and the inscrutability of His election, respecting the Therefore of it which no Wherefore can circumvent. Yet in so doing—if we really have God before us as the Subject of this work—we honour the source and citadel of all equity and judgment: not merely the wisdom which *must* silence the objections of our thinking and feeling, as though we were confronted by a *brutum factum*—as though all discussion were terminated at this point by force—by a ‘higher’ force, but still by force; but the wisdom before which we *can* only be silent. We are not bowing before the caprice of a tyrant. Our submission cannot be such that it is accompanied by a still-remaining and ever-increasing inward complaint and resistance. Rather, of ourselves, of our own better knowledge, we will to be silent. It is not that our mouth is stopped—for then our silence would not be a voluntary act of obedience, but an act of disobedience which has been prevented and suppressed. It is rather because our ears have heard the Therefore which is the truly satisfying and convincing answer to every Wherefore. We are persuaded, and have no more questions to put. God Himself, and in Him wisdom itself and righteousness itself, has communicated Himself to us and given us Himself as the answer. What God does in freedom is in order. And in that it is done in freedom, we can and must perceive and recognize that it is in order without first measuring it by our own conceptions of order and only then recognizing it to be such.⁴³

⁴² Barth, *Dogmatik II,2*, 20; *Dogmatics II,2*, 20.

⁴³ Barth, *Dogmatik II,2*, 22; *Dogmatics II,2*, 22 (Barth’s emphasis).

God's election as the beginning of all God's ways with the world expresses a limit to our conceptual powers as self-conscious creatures, but we are not required to sacrifice our intellect or understanding when we encounter this limit. Within the theological praxis, our reason conforms to God's acts. As I have already implied, what bridges the gap between the earliest formulations and the specific direction they are given here is the speculative theology developed in the *FQI*. At the feet of Anselm of Canterbury, Barth found a way to show how the form of God's revelation is inherently reasonable, that our capacity to reason conforms to the limit God sets of its own accord. Thus, revelation reaffirms our reasonable nature. As Barth put it above: "What God does in freedom is in order."⁴⁴

I. God's election of humanity and the rest of creation in Jesus Christ is the paradigmatic free act of God. Although springing from God's innermost being and essence, it is a free act *ad extra*, towards what is not God. As Barth points out: "It is a divine relation *ad extra* (*nach aussen*) undoubtedly; for both the man and the people represented in Him are creatures and not God. But it is a relation which is irrevocable, so that once God has willed to enter into it, and has in fact entered into it, He could not be God without it. It is a relation in which God is self-determined, so that the determination belongs no less to Him than all that He is in and for Himself."⁴⁵ Nothing conditions this act of love and grace. It precedes all actualities and potentialities in God's relation to what is not God. As God's free self-affirmation, who God proves to be in his election of the human, Jesus of Nazareth (and the people he represents), is an unconditional affirmation of who God is, has always been, and will always be. As Barth writes: "Apart from this man and apart from this people God would be a different, an alien God."⁴⁶ In other words, there is no scope for subjective fancy, creativity, or abstraction independent of God's free self-affirmation in election. As an expression of God's freedom and love, it is a self-affirmation without remainder.

We can thus see the doctrine of election as the culmination of the entire form of thought that has shaped Barth's theology from its beginnings. It explicitly draws together the radical reading praxis, the freedom of God, God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ, the negation of abstract subjectivity, the emphasis on rational and objective conceptual mediation, and the

⁴⁴ Barth, *Dogmatik II*, 2, 20; *Dogmatics II*, 2, 20 (Barth's emphasis).

⁴⁵ Barth, *Dogmatik II*, 2, 6; *Dogmatics II*, 2, 7.

⁴⁶ Barth, *Dogmatik II*, 2, 6; *Dogmatics II*, 2, 7.

unconditional affirmation that characterizes a genuine speculative theology. This is as it should be and what we should expect. As Barth writes: “[Jesus Christ] is so all-inclusively, comprehending absolutely within Himself all things and everything, enclosing within Himself the autonomy of all other words, decrees and beginnings.”⁴⁷

J. At the heart of the reformulation of the doctrine is one of Barth's exegetical masterstrokes. It is an exegesis of the prologue of the gospel of John.⁴⁸ It will be helpful to compare this exegesis with Barth's earlier exegesis in *Romans II*. The difference between the two mirrors the subtle change from negativity to affirmation that I outlined in the last chapter.

In *Romans II*, the figure of Jesus Christ is primarily a negative entity. In the text, his progression towards his suffering and death unfolds a negativity that determines the conceptual possibilities of the engaged reader. Forms and positions of judgment and thought from which the reader could assign his or her meaning or value to the biblical text are themselves subjected to judgment. At the end, the text itself stands on its own as it gives rise to a critical, yet structuring, form of thought. As such, it gives expression to a form of knowledge and agency of a different order as it lets the unconditioned and sovereign subject of God take root in human thought. Through this practically mediated negativity, the text shapes the reader's thinking such that he or she cannot but let God be God in thought.

Barth's exegesis of the Johannine prologue serves much the same purpose. The difference between it and *Romans II* is that the prologue principally gives expression to the affirmative logic of revelation, which Barth came to see as primary. Confirming the certain form of knowledge of God's unconditional self-affirmation as being in freedom and love, the exegesis shows how external concepts, standards, and values fall short of

⁴⁷ Barth, *Dogmatik II*, 2, 102; *Dogmatics II*, 2, 95.

⁴⁸ Very briefly, Barth's argument in his exegesis of the Johannine prologue is that the Word of God mentioned in the first verse is identical to the human being, Jesus of Nazareth. The use of a specific form of the demonstrative pronoun *boutos* with the perfect form of *einai* in verses two and fifteen make this connection explicit. This means that when we read of the Word that was in the beginning, we do not need to conjure up theories about what this Word stands for with reference to philosophical or mythological ideologies or worldviews (Barth, *Dogmatik II*, 2, 104; *Dogmatics II*, 2, 97). The Word in the beginning is the human Jesus of Nazareth as the form of God's self-revelation, self-affirmation, and self-communication. “Over against all that is really outside God, Jesus Christ is the eternal will of God, the eternal decree of God and the eternal beginning of God” (Barth, *Dogmatik II*, 2, 106; *Dogmatics II*, 2, 99).

the structuring rationality of the prologue. The text gives expression to immanent necessity and rationality, which emerge *sui generis* from the text itself. The text's own immanent argument that the *Logos*, the Word that was in the beginning, is Jesus Christ dissolves our various subjective bids on its meaning and use. By means of this affirmative claim concerning the essential relationship between the Word and the man, Jesus of Nazareth, the text negates attempts at circumventing it. Its immanent rationality expresses a limit beyond which we cannot go. Ignoring this limit to our conceptual capacity for transcendence results in arbitrary and subjective opinion rather than objective and textually grounded understanding.

The biblical text contains the singular discourse that maps the absolute limits to our conceptual power as self-conscious subjects. Principally, in the prologue to the gospel of John, the limit to our conceptual capacities in the face of the self-affirmation of God in Jesus Christ is explicitly confirmed. The difference between it and the early reading of Paul's Romans hinges on whether the negativity makes room for affirmation, or whether the unconditional affirmation gives shape to certain knowledge that is clarified by means of a series of negations that follow from it.

Here we return to the issue raised in section G. above. The logic of affirmation and the resulting form of speculative theology is Christological through and through. Christology, properly understood in light of the doctrine of election and the exegesis of the prologue of John, is the practical and textual ground of the thought-form that impressed itself more and more on Barth. Seeing this lays bare the tendencies towards abstraction and the brute negation of our capacities that marred the early theology of *Romans II*. We now know that the affirmation is primary. It is textually primary. It is epistemologically primary. It is theologically primary. Of course, the seeds are there in *Romans II*—but there the stress was on the primacy of the negativity and that distorts the theology and makes it ultimately unsustainable.

K. A number of fascinating theological implications follow from Barth's reformulation of the doctrine of election. Not least among these is the issue of the potential universal salvation of humanity and creation. Considering the theological richness of Barth's doctrine of election, my present aim is quite narrow. It centers on the form of Barth's theology and the knowledge that it mediates. I will therefore limit my focus to Barth's explicitly epistemological reflections on the doctrine, after which I return to the earlier parts of the *Kirchliche Dogmatik* and discuss Barth's treatment of the "speculative theologians" and his thoughts on the beauty of God.

As just mentioned, Barth explicitly addresses the epistemological aspect of the doctrine of election. In taking up this issue, I am thus focusing on a theme that Barth himself shifts to the forefront of his own treatment of the reformulation of the doctrine. Barth frames his epistemological reflections by drawing an important distinction between his formulation of the doctrine and the various interpretations that preceded it. "At this point we part company with all previous interpretations of the doctrine of predestination. In these the *Subject and object of predestination* (the electing God and the elected man) are *determined* ultimately by the fact that both quantities are treated as *unknown*."⁴⁹ In light of what we have seen concerning the development of Barth's theology, we should not be surprised that he finds this line of argument deeply problematic. If the form of the knowledge of God is uncertain, then everything falls apart. If God is baldly unknown, then the theologian can at best claim to have relative knowledge. That would create space for skepticism, leave the conceptual power of the human subject uninformed about its essential limits, and undermine the objectivity of theological discourse. It should therefore come as no surprise that Barth completely rejects this general line of interpretation. Barth: "In the sharpest contrast to this view our thesis that the eternal will of God is the election of Jesus Christ means that we deny the existence of any such twofold mystery."⁵⁰

Everything turns on whether the mystery of God's freedom and sovereignty is external or internal to the form of knowledge obtained by faith. By this, I mean that we must distinguish between a notion of theological knowledge that sets the incomprehensibility of God over and against the form of knowledge that we seem to have of God and theological knowledge within which the incomprehensibility of God is an essential and positive part of the form of knowledge itself. In other words, is God's freedom an internal or an external condition of theological knowledge? As Barth writes: "In this antithesis it is not a matter of the mystery of God's freedom in His eternal will concerning man. We have to do with this mystery too—the mystery of God and the mystery of man which arises as man is caught up by the eternal will of God into God's own mystery. But what matters here is really the nature of this one and twofold mystery, whether it is incomprehensible light or incomprehensible darkness. What matters is whether at this point we have to recognize and respect the majesty of a

⁴⁹ Barth, *Dogmatik II*, 2, 157; *Dogmatics II*, 2, 146.

⁵⁰ Barth, *Dogmatik II*, 2, 158; *Dogmatics II*, 2, 146.

God who is known to us or whether we have to recognize and respect the majesty of a God who is not known to us.”⁵¹ As we have seen repeatedly, either the form of knowledge is certain or it turns out not to be knowledge after all. The reformulation of the doctrine of election reaffirms the certainty of the form of knowledge that we have by making it explicit that the grounding texts give us “a single and known form [*Gestalt*] to the unknown God and unknown man.”⁵²

L. The exegesis of the prologue of John reaffirms the underlying practical rationality of Barth’s theology. The biblical texts themselves contain an argumentative structure expressed in stringent conceptual rules, which we can grasp and articulate rationally. The rules that determine the use of “God,” “*Logos*,” and “Jesus of Nazareth” block the potential subjective imposition that threatens to undermine theological knowing.⁵³ They consistently direct the reader back to the text and the grounding reading praxis, whereby the texts take on the part of the actual limit of our discursive mastery. In this sense, the crux of Barth’s theology is providing the right understanding of the relationship between text, praxis, subjectivity, and rationality. For Barth, a genuine speculative theology in which the form of the knowledge of faith is certain depends completely on adopting the right approach to the biblical text.⁵⁴

By insisting on the immanent logic of the biblical text, the prologue of John presents us with knowledge of a different order that proceeds from the text outward, so to speak. In light of the limit that the text places on our self-conscious subjectivity, our thinking has to discern and conform to a form of knowledge that we could not have obtained for ourselves were it not for God’s self-affirmation. “This Word does not allow us to go beyond it. It allows us no other view of God or man than that which it reveals itself ... This Word alone must satisfy all our questioning because it alone can do so. The work of God is revealed in this Word in its totality, being there revealed in such a way that there can be no depth of the knowledge of the divine work except in God’s Word, and the knowledge of the divine work cannot lead us to any depth which is not that of God’s Word.”⁵⁵ We can express the rationality that shapes our use of the “Word

⁵¹ Barth, *Dogmatik II*, 2, 158; *Dogmatics II*, 2, 146.

⁵² Barth, *Dogmatik II*, 2, 160; *Dogmatics II*, 2, 147.

⁵³ Barth, *Dogmatik II*, 2, 160; *Dogmatics II*, 2, 147.

⁵⁴ Barth, *Dogmatik II*, 2, 161; *Dogmatics II*, 2, 148.

⁵⁵ Barth, *Dogmatik II*, 2, 163; *Dogmatics II*, 2, 150.

of God,” who from all eternity has borne the name, Jesus Christ, with the formula “above which nothing greater can be conceived”—*id quo maius cogitari nequit*. In effect, it expresses exactly the same rule as the doctrine of the Trinity.

Here I want to turn to an interesting theological discussion concerning the relationship between God’s election and God’s being as the one who loves in freedom. Throughout the last two chapters (and implicitly throughout) my argument has been that Barth discovers a singular logic of affirmation in Anselm of Canterbury’s theology and that this logic of affirmation enables him to develop what is best described as a speculative theology. This theology provides a form of knowing that is beyond doubt and thus undercuts the potential self-absolutizing of the self-conscious human subject. It rules out the possibility that the power of self-conscious thought, the essential condition of rational discourse, swerves into an abstract irrationality. God’s revelation does not brutally block this tendency towards abstraction in theology, instead persuading our reason to acknowledge that which is beyond its capacity to comprehend. As Barth put it: the mystery of God’s freedom is incomprehensible light.⁵⁶

In a remarkable article from 2000, “Grace and Being,” Dr. Bruce McCormack argues that the reformulation of the doctrine of election has consequences for the doctrine of the Trinity of God: God’s election of Jesus of Nazareth is what constitutes God’s being as triune. Essentially, the argument is that by Barth’s own lights he has no knowledge of God’s being that is not determined by God’s election in Jesus Christ. Thus, when Barth thinks that he is entitled to speak counterfactually about God’s essential being as triune independently of God’s turning towards God’s creation in Jesus Christ, he is overstepping the limits of what he can actually know. It appears to be a subjective imposition that cannot find an objective justification, since such justification could be derived only from God’s election. McCormack writes: “Of course, it would always remain true for Barth that God is triune in himself (in pretemporal eternity) and

⁵⁶ “As we understand the freedom of the predestinating God, it does not deny but opens itself to our knowledge. And it is this positive understanding which constitutes our deviation from tradition, the ‘innovation’ made in our thesis ... God is the self-revealing God, and as such He is the electing God. The eternal will of God which is before time is the same as the eternal will of God which is above time, and which reveals itself as such and operates as such in time. In fact, we perceive the one in the other. God’s eternity is one. God Himself is one. He may only be known either altogether or not at all. When He is known He is known all at once and altogether” (Barth, *Dogmatik II*, 2, 169ff; *Dogmatics II*, 2, 156).

not just in his historical revelation. Were God triune only in his revelation, the immanent Trinity would collapse into the economic Trinity. But that God is triune for the sake of his revelation? How could Barth deny this without positing a mode of existence in God above and prior to God's gracious election—the very thing he accused Calvin of having done? How can he (or anyone else) know that God is triune in and for himself, in independence of his eternal will to be revealed?⁵⁷ Those are good and important questions. In light of what I have argued is the essential structure of Barth's theology, I will venture an answer.

It is important to point out that McCormack explicitly rules out the answer that seems the most intuitive in light of Barth's theology as a whole. McCormack mentions that, in a later volume of the *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, Barth points out that God's incarnation and the suffering and death that God will undergo in the being of the Son does not give rise to a rift between God's being and essence. In "Grace and Being," McCormack presents two ways of taking that claim: (1) God's activity as Reconciler is the perfect expression of the divine essence, or (2) God's activity as Reconciler is constitutive of the divine essence. McCormack writes: "Either reading would make sense of the claim that God undergoes no change on the ontic level in becoming incarnate in time. So which of them is correct? ... It is sufficient here to observe that Barth's fundamental thesis—in accordance with which 'Jesus Christ' is made to be the Subject of election—would certainly seem to require the latter reading."⁵⁸

In light of what we have seen concerning Barth's theological approach and development, does it really appear immediately obvious that acknowledging Jesus Christ as Subject of election requires us to commit to the second option? This appears self-evident to McCormack apparently because his reading of Barth turns on a very different understanding of the knowledge of faith from the one I have presented in these last chapters.

Following Barth, I have argued that the doctrine of the Trinity expresses God's unsublatable subjectivity, which is revealed in Jesus Christ. I have argued that God's unsublatable subjectivity is identical with God's essence as the one who loves in freedom. Following Barth, I have argued that understanding God's freedom means understanding that we cannot think

⁵⁷ Bruce L. McCormack, "Grace and Being: The Role of God's Gracious Election in Karl Barth's Theological Ontology," from *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 193.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 188.

beyond God or occupy a position from which to pass judgment on God's self-affirmation. Essentially, in all God's manifestations, God is that above which nothing greater can be conceived. Following Barth, I have argued that this entails that we cannot conceive of God as not existing or as existing differently. In other words, God's unsublatable subjectivity as the one who loves in freedom is revealed in Jesus Christ, and we cannot conceive of God as not existing or as existing differently from God's self-affirmation in God's revelation. Although we cannot fully comprehend the actual, unconditional form of God's freedom, we know with absolute certainty that God is who God reveals God to be—because it is impossible to occupy a subjective position that could call that into doubt. Therefore, we cannot think beyond God's freedom and it is through this divine freedom that God proves God's existence as God. God's election of the man, Jesus of Nazareth, is the primary expression of this freedom of God. Holding on to the thought of the freedom of God, which we cannot circumvent or dispense with, we recognize that God would still be the unsublatable subject who loves in freedom no matter how that freedom is expressed, since God's being is unconditional. Its expression cannot *not* reaffirm it. Obviously, this is so no matter how we come to acknowledge it.

As Barth writes: "We know God's will apart from predestination only as the act in which from all eternity and in all eternity God affirms and confirms Himself. We must guard against disputing the eternal will of God which precedes even predestination. We must not allow God to be submerged in His relationship to the universe or think of Him as tied in Himself to the universe. Under the concept of predestination, or the election of grace, we say that in freedom (its affirmation and not its loss) God tied Himself to the universe. Under the concept of predestination we confess the eternal will of the God who is free in Himself, even in the sense that originally and properly He wills and affirms and confirms Himself. But we can confess this will of God only under the concept of predestination."⁵⁹ God's activity as Reconciler in Jesus Christ perfectly expresses the essence of the divine subject as freedom and love. Election gives it a form that can be known by creatures like us. Yet, even if God had not elected to be for humanity in Jesus Christ, it is inconceivable that this would have negated God's freedom in any way. It would not have made God's subjectivity sublatable. It would not have negated God's love.

⁵⁹ Barth, *Dogmatik II*, 2, 168f; *Dogmatics II*, 2, 155.

It would not have negated the inner being of God that we cannot not conceive—albeit in human concepts and words—as the Trinity of God.

This is what Barth explicitly argues in his dogmatic work. His arguments present us with a rigorous and rational theology of affirmation. Therefore, I cannot see why it should be immediately obvious that the doctrine of Election should make us go for the second of McCormack's options rather than the first. I think the first option fits Barth's overall theology perfectly—even if I would not use the same terminology to describe it that McCormack uses.

M. McCormack argues for the logical primacy of election over Trinity. McCormack's exact formulation is this: “[T]he work of God *ad intra* (the Trinitarian processions) find their ground in the *first* of the works of God *ad extra* (viz., election).”⁶⁰ He acknowledges that Barth's position is the opposite, but he puts that down to a subjective imposition and a failure to follow through on actual insights on Barth's part.⁶¹

As far as I can tell, McCormack is in fact arguing that we can conceive something, some state of affairs, beyond the form in which God is known, that is, the Trinity. We can conceive of a logical moment in which God is not identical with the one whom God reveals God to be in God's revelation. We can occupy a position from which we can call into question the unsublatable subjectivity of God. Since Barth argued, I think correctly, that conceiving something greater than that above which nothing greater can be conceived is straightforwardly inconsistent and tantamount to nonsense, it is hard not to agree that McCormack's position is the exact opposite of Barth's.

In short, there is no inconsistency in Barth's thinking on this matter. I see no reason to revise Barth's doctrine of the Trinity based on the doctrine of election. In my view the doctrine of election beautifully confirms Barth's overall theological approach—and, as such, it is a high point of his work. McCormack's reading is likely a result of his particular way of approaching Barth, which includes rejecting Barth's own claims concerning the role of the *FQI*. McCormack rejects Barth's account of the *FQI* because he has a particular take on Barth's relationship with German Idealism and Kant in particular. As I have already suggested,

⁶⁰ McCormack, “Grace and Being,” 194 (McCormack's emphasis).

⁶¹ I must admit that I am not exactly sure how McCormack uses the term “logical” in this context. If the argument is that I know X because Y, and therefore Y is necessarily the ground of X, this does not appear to be an argument based on logical necessity.

McCormack misinterprets Barth's take on Kant. He is wrong about the *FQI* and, ultimately, I think, the doctrine of election as well.

It should therefore come as no surprise that McCormack completely rejects "speculative theology." McCormack writes: "What Barth accomplished with his doctrine of election was to establish a hermeneutical rule which would allow the church to speak authoritatively about what God was doing—and, indeed, who and what God was/is—'before the foundation of the world' *without engaging in speculation*."⁶² That seems wrong as well. This is not something new that comes with the doctrine of election. The entire theology from beginning to end serves to undermine subjective imposition. The doctrine of election confirms a form of thought that is shaped by the logic of affirmation that Barth learned at the feet of Anselm of Canterbury. Barth describes that theology as "speculative" in quotes. In view of my reading of the German Idealists, my reading of the structure of Barth's argument, and my understanding of what he takes to be the challenge of the abstract power of self-conscious subjectivity that modern theology faces, I propose simply removing the quotes. As long as the biblical scriptures and the critical praxis of reading and rereading form the ground of one's theology, there is no good reason why it should not be speculative. The theology Barth develops is a speculative theology in the most straightforward sense of that term.

N. McCormack's theology is unquestionably Christocentric in virtue of his deep commitment to writing and thinking theologically only in light of God's revelation in Jesus Christ. That said, it is striking that McCormack does not appreciate the way God's revelation in Jesus Christ practically and theoretically determines and shapes the singular *form of theological knowing* and thus the self-consciousness of the reflecting theologian. For Barth, the theological inferences that he draws force themselves on him with logical necessity. The objectivity of theology resides precisely in the way this conceptual determination can be made explicit and inform our discursive reasoning, while still allowing us a certain moment of spontaneity and conceptual experimentation in mediating the underlying structural necessity and its manifestations.

In principle, the problem with McCormack's theology is that it appears to rely on a moment of pure subjective commitment. For McCormack, our being unable to go beyond God's revelation in Jesus Christ is not a recognition that forces itself on the engaged subject with logical necessity

⁶² McCormack, "Grace and Being," 183 (McCormack's emphasis).

by precluding any alternative form of conception. Here, the subjective commitment to God's revelation in Jesus Christ is precisely that—one subjective commitment among others.⁶³ As it stands, it appears a choice that the subject makes—implicitly confronted with other options. This means that the role of the self-conscious subject is never brought within the scope of rational, discursive, theological mediation in McCormack's reading of Barth, but instead remains implicitly autonomous in relation to God's revelation. McCormack's argument concerning the status of the doctrine of the Trinity is the most explicit example of his departure from the rationality of Barth's theology, but it follows straightforwardly from the rejection of the role of the *FQI*. Precisely by not addressing the question of the self-conscious subject, McCormack's theology slides into the realm of subjectivism.

Still, it is the great merit of McCormack's reading of Barth to have presented this important issue with such clarity. Even if it is ultimately a misreading, it brings out the importance of the issue of the self-conscious subject and the relationship with German Idealism in a sharp and well-argued way. As such, it is a wonderful and consistent piece of theology.

O. I am leaving Barth's work on the doctrine of election to return to my overall theme of mapping Barth's speculative theology. At the end of the last chapter, I quoted Barth's positive assessment of the great theologian P. K. Marheineke. I have also mentioned his positive reception of parts of I. A. Dorner's theology. My treatment of Barth's speculative theology would not be complete if I did not include a few comments on Barth's reading of these two theological masters of the nineteenth century in the *Kirchliche Dogmatik*.

As we have seen, Barth can be quite critical of Marheineke's theological approach. As we also saw in *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, he argues that Marheineke's use of the notion of Spirit tends to blur the distinction between the divine and the human. In *Kirchliche Dogmatik I,1*, Barth also suggests that Marheineke's emphasis on the mediating role of the spirit risks sublating the biblical texts as a moment (however important) in the development of the consciousness and knowing of the Christian

⁶³As I have pointed out earlier, McCormack does refer to the Holy Spirit as the subjective source of the recognition that Jesus Christ is the sole source of knowledge of things divine. The problem is that this supposed intervention by the Spirit remains purely subjective and immediate. For all we know and can say, its expression is the same as any given subjective commitment undertaken in a completely undetermined, and therefore arbitrary, vacuum.

thinker.⁶⁴ That would obviously render any theology—speculative or not—illegitimate. That said, Marheineke has recognized that the knowledge of faith must be absolute if it is to count as knowledge at all. Precisely because the true author of the knowledge of faith is God, it cannot be subject to doubt or questioning. As Barth also argues, as it follows from the sovereign self-affirmation of God in God's revelation, the *analogia fidei* (the analogy of faith) signals a form of creaturely knowing mirroring the divine self-knowledge in human concepts and propositions.⁶⁵

In this context, Barth expressly invokes Marheineke: "One must also be sufficiently impartial not to overlook that which for all the dubious elements can still be taken *in bonam partem* in the words of the Hegelian P. Marheineke: 'In the human spirit God is not manifest through this but through Himself, and hence manifest also to the human spirit. This, as reason, is annulled in Him. The hardest thing that science requires of every devotee is that pure substance show itself as subject, that he with his spirit should subject himself to the divine spirit and be patient under it. His true knowledge of the absolute is itself absolute' (*Grundlehren d. ch. Dogm. Als Wissenschaft*, 1827, § 115)."⁶⁶ Again, theology is speculative insofar as its form of knowing, as a mirroring of the divine, is itself absolute. On this issue, Barth and Marheineke essentially agree. God's Word precedes any agency on our part, but when it seizes us and activates our capacity to reason, the knowledge that it bestows on the self-conscious creature is not subject to doubt and is therefore absolute in the Hegelian sense.

P. This certain form of faith's knowledge has consequences for what we are entitled to conceive of, commit to, and proclaim concerning God's ways and works in relation to creation as well as God's eternal essence. As we have seen, if our form of knowing is certain, then it obviously allows us greater leverage in terms of how far our inferences can legitimately take us. Thus when Barth turns from his reflections on "The Being of God as the One who Loves in Freedom" to "The Perfections of God" in *Kirchliche Dogmatik II,1*, he returns to the issue of the status of our knowledge of God and God's being in itself. When the theologian speaks of God's eternal attributes, this does not entail giving up on the objectivity of our

⁶⁴ Barth, *Dogmatik I,1*, 272; *Dogmatics I,1*, 258.

⁶⁵ Barth: "In virtue of this similarity our possibility of knowing God's Word is the possibility of a clear and certain knowledge, not equal but at least similar to the clarity and certainty with which God knows Himself in His Word" (Barth, *Dogmatik I,1*, 256; *Dogmatics I,1*, 243).

⁶⁶ Barth, *Dogmatik I,1*, 257; *Dogmatics I,1*, 244.

knowledge. As Barth writes: “It is to the credit of certain German theologians of the [nineteenth] century that in this matter they broke utterly, not only with the total, but also with the partial nominalism of the Thomistic and orthodox Protestant tradition.”⁶⁷ If we actually have knowledge of God through faith, then—insofar as it is actual knowledge—we can speak about God’s being as it is in itself without fear of subjective imposition. Our knowledge cannot be reduced to a discourse on the *appearance* of the divine, which would obviously negate its status as knowledge. If it was merely a subjective appearance, we would be forced to switch from “is” to “seems” when we spoke about God, implicitly undermining all our actual claims to know God.

Barth can therefore quote I. A. Dorner’s *System der Christliche Glaubenslehre*, where Dorner writes: “Since God cannot wish to appear other than he is, and since no dualistic power checks His will to reveal Himself, then it must be that in God’s self-revelations we see revelations of what and how He is (not simply what and how he is not), and therefore the revelation of objective attributes.”⁶⁸ As Barth adds: “This is the line of thought which we must develop.”⁶⁹ Of course, we can recognize this as the same line of thought that we have already seen Barth developing throughout his dogmatic work. Divine self-affirmation and objectivity go hand in hand and allow us to bypass the appeal of nominalism, skepticism, subjectivism, and all other relativistic forms of thought that spring from a notion of God as a thing-in-itself outside any possible human knowledge.

Now one of the central issues in this chapter has been the knowability of the essence of God. In light of Barth’s formulations in the *FQI*, I have argued that God’s being as the One who loves in freedom entails that we cannot conceive God as not existing or as existing differently. This raises the question of the immutability of God. Is the triune God who loves in freedom immutable? Barth addresses this question in “The Constancy and Omnipotence of God” in *Kirchliche Dogmatik II,1*. As he begins his exposition, he explicitly invokes Dorner’s great essay “Ueber die richtige Fassung des dogmatischen Begriffs der Unveränderlichkeit Gottes” and writes: “Those who know the essay will recognize as they read this subsection how much I owe to Dorner’s inspiration.”⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Barth, *Dogmatik II,1*, 371; *Dogmatics II,1*, 330.

⁶⁸ I. A. Dorner, *System der Christliche Glaubenslehre I* (Berlin: Verlag von Wilhelm Herk, 1879), 186.

⁶⁹ Barth, *Dogmatik II,1*, 372; *Dogmatics II,1*, 330.

⁷⁰ Barth, *Dogmatik II,1*, 554; *Dogmatics II,1*, 493.

Essentially, Dorner's argument is that the attribute of immutability pertains to God's "ethical essence." In other words, God's goodness as the essence of God's practical "life" or subjectivity is immutable. We stray into unwarranted musings and fanciful metaphysics when we abstract from the practical, and thus ethical or moral, life of God as the key to God's immutable essence. Dorner's argument fits perfectly with Barth's own theological insight: God's essence is captured in God's being as the one who loves in freedom. As Barth writes: "His love cannot cease to be His love nor His freedom His freedom... [I]t is just at this point that He is the 'immutable' God. For at no place or time can He or will He turn against Himself or contradict Himself, not even in virtue of His freedom or for the sake of His love. What He does in virtue of His freedom for the sake of His love will never be the surrender but always at every point the self-affirmation of His freedom and His love, a fresh demonstration of His life... The answer, therefore, to the question: 'What is the immutable?' is: 'This living God in His self-affirmation is the immutable.'" ⁷¹

Here I want briefly to circle back to the issue of the relationship between God's essence and activity in light of the doctrine of election. Following Dorner and Barth, the relationship seems straightforward. Unless something radically changed in Barth's theology between 1940 and 1942, Barth would have had this understanding of God's ethical essence in mind, when he wrote about predestination two years later, and we have no indications of any such radical change in Barth's theology in that period. In fact, when one reads what Barth writes about the incarnation as part of his reflections on the immutability or constancy of God, it is hard to see how he could have written anything else when he turned to the doctrine of election in 1942.

Quoting Barth at some length:

We can say that the reason why God created the world and set up in it the office of reconciliation, is because He was able, willing and ready to be one with the creature in Jesus Christ and because He did in fact do this. Because He is the One who did and still does this, He is constant [*beständig*] in all His works and constant also in Himself. Note that this 'constancy' of His involves the point that it is grace that He did and still does this. He did not and does not have to do it. He did it and He does it in free love. The God in whose essential nature it lies to do this, not of necessity but in free love,

⁷¹ Barth, *Dogmatik II,1*, 556; *Dogmatics II,1*,495.

is the constant God. But this ‘constancy’ also involves the fact that He has actually done this in free love. Therefore God is constant, He does not alter, when He becomes and is one with the creature in Jesus Christ... God does not contradict Himself in this act, but confirms and reveals Himself as the One He is, and as the Creator and Reconciler of His creation. He does this as the One He is because the incarnation as such is the confirmation of the trinity of God.⁷²

A sharp distinction between essence and activity becomes irrelevant, once we recognize with Dorner and Barth that God’s essence is God’s freedom and love—the ethical essence of the unsublatable, triune Subject, which affirms and confirms itself in all its ways and acts.

In his 1957 book, *Der Triumph der Gnade in der Theologie Karl Barths*, G. C. Berkouwer argued that at the heart of Barth’s theology was “the triumph of grace.”⁷³ Berkouwer’s book ultimately fails because it confuses the expression with the ground. It is not that Barth insists on a form of triumphalism and therefore writes what he writes. Rather, God’s self-affirmation in the revelation of Jesus Christ cannot but result in the unconditional acknowledgment of God’s free love, which sweeps all forms of opposition aside. Still, Berkouwer did strike on a central aspect of Barth’s theology. The logic of affirmation that generates this speculative theology of glorification can to a certain extent be characterized, as Berkouwer does, as a triumph of grace. God’s revelation in Jesus Christ embraces the human subject in an affirmation of Creator and creature, and, within this “covenantal space,” it includes the self-conscious human subject in the glorification of God’s majesty.

The affirmation of God and the affirmation of the human creature, the divine yes and the human yes: these ring like a refrain throughout Barth’s theology. By emphasizing the unconditional freedom of God, Barth’s theology becomes a rigorously rational theology of affirmation. As such, his theology is characterized by a deep affirmation of the rationality of the self-conscious human subject. Human self-conscious reason both affirms and, in this affirmation, is itself affirmed—as it gives expression to the unconditional lordship of God, the redeemer, the reconciler, and the creator. Through God’s grace in Jesus Christ, human reason comes to mirror the divine wisdom.

⁷² Barth, *Dogmatik II*, 1, 579; *Dogmatics II*, 1, 515.

⁷³ G. C. Berkouwer, *Der Triumph der Gnade in der Theologie Karl Barths* (Neukirchen Kreis Moers: Verlag der Buchhandlung des Erziehungsvereins, 1957), 13.

Q. I am fast approaching the end of my treatment of the speculative aspect of Karl Barth's theology. I want to finish this work by turning to a part of Barth's theology that I find deeply mysterious and fascinating: Barth's account of the beauty of God. The treatment of the beauty (*Schönheit*) of God is found in the section on "The Eternity and Glory of God," and thus it belongs to the reflections on the perfections of divine freedom.

I have argued that noticing the speculative aspect of Barth's theology makes it possible to line up Barth's work with the work of the German Idealists and provides a way to get to the heart of the drive towards unconditional affirmation that defines Barth's writings. Unfortunately, speculative theology can invoke associations with system-building, a focus on synthesizing, and striving towards some form of immanent unity or totality. Throughout I have argued that this is not the case with regards to Barth's speculative theology. In fact, the speculative moment serves precisely to undermine such tendencies. Nonetheless, should there be any lingering doubts, Barth's treatment of the beauty of God makes the anti-systematic tendencies completely explicit by underscoring the joyfulness, open-endedness and playfulness of theological discourse.

On that note, the account also takes on additional significance because of how it is placed in the volume. It takes up by far the largest part of the final section on the glory of God, yet Barth explicitly insists that it must be viewed as a *specification* of glory as a divine perfection. In other words, beauty is *not* itself a divine perfection. Still, it is the one concept that actually reveals the glory of God in the most enlightening way. As Barth writes: "The question is whether we cannot in some sense give a name and a more precise designation even to the *form* in which the divine transition takes place in which we have always to see the heart of the concept of the divine glory."⁷⁴ Here Beauty is indispensable, yet not itself a proper attribute. That alone makes it an interesting idea, which takes us to the limits of theological thought. This particular "conceptual" position emerges for two reasons. Examining these and Barth's actual account of God's beauty ties together several of the main issues of this book, while also opening up a new line of theological mediation.

R. Barth ties the glory of God to the divine power unconditionally to reaffirm God's divinity in all that God does. "... [God's glory is] *God Himself in the truth and capacity and act in which He makes Himself known*

⁷⁴ Barth, *Dogmatik II,1*, 732; *Dogmatics II,1*, 649.

as God. This truth and capacity and act are the triumph, the very core, of His freedom.”⁷⁵ In short, the glory of God is God’s power.⁷⁶

Now the question quoted in the section above concerning the form of the divine glory asks about precisely that—the form. And when we appeal to the power of God, it can appear as a temptation to pass over this question, simply assert that God is glorious in God’s power, and reject the usefulness of the form/content distinction at this point. The temptation is to simply reassert God’s power and underscore it by pointing to its unconditional and overwhelming force. That would be to reject as irrelevant the enquiry into the specific way in which God’s power is manifest. The concept of beauty forces itself on us precisely when we refuse to reject the issue of the form of God’s power, but rather engage it head on. As Barth writes: “It would be always most unsettling if all that could be given were the negative answer which dismisses the question; if in dealing with the knowledge of God’s glory we had to be satisfied with the existence of a *brutum factum*, and therefore a blind spot in our knowledge; if we had to count and declare ourselves convinced and persuaded when face to face with this dark spot.”⁷⁷ To assert God’s glory as brute might initially seem like underscoring its quality as unconditional power, but it essentially undermines it by making it arbitrary. As such, it would leave room for the *sacrificium intellectus*, which ultimately relies on an abstract and undetermined human subjectivity and its potential for irrational self-determination.

Now when we speak about God’s power as God’s glory, there is a dimension of “glory” that we cannot capture by “power.” The two are not synonymous. Here the idea of beauty becomes important. The idea of beauty provides us with a way to speak explicitly about the form of divine power, which allows us to acknowledge it as more than brute force.⁷⁸ The idea of beauty signals the power to draw us in willingly and joyfully. As Barth writes: “If we can and must say that God is beautiful, to say this is to say how He enlightens and convinces and persuades us. It is to describe not merely the naked fact of His revelation or its power, but the shape and form in which it is a fact and is power. It is to say that God has the superior force, this power of attraction, which speaks for itself, which wins and

⁷⁵ Barth, *Dogmatik II,1*, 723; *Dogmatics II,1*, 641.

⁷⁶ Barth, *Dogmatik II,1*, 733; *Dogmatics II,1*, 650.

⁷⁷ Barth, *Dogmatik II,1*, 733; *Dogmatics II,1*, 650.

⁷⁸ “It turns on the question of the form—and only on the question of the form!—of revelation” (Barth, *Dogmatik II,1*, 739; *Dogmatics II,1*, 655).

conquers, in the fact that He is beautiful, divinely beautiful, beautiful in His own way, in a way that is His alone, beautiful as the unattainable primary beauty, yet really beautiful⁷⁹ To understand how theology can at no point simply appeal to brute force, but instead unfolds as a thoroughly rational form of inquiry, is to understand that the object of theology, God, draws us in, persuades and convinces us through God's beauty.⁸⁰

S. The glory of God is expressed by means of two overarching notions: power and beauty. As we just saw, merely stressing God's power implicitly threatens the rationality of theology and thus the dignity of God's self-revelation. On the other hand, simply reflecting on the beauty of God without considering God's power would not adequately capture God's freedom and sovereignty. Furthermore, it does not have the textual warrant that would allow the theologian to posit it as a divine attribute. As Barth writes: "In view of what the biblical testimony says about God it would be an unjustified risk to try to bring the knowledge of God under the denominator of our idea of the beautiful even in the same way as we have done in our consideration of these leading concepts. It is not a leading concept."⁸¹ This once again underscores that the biblical texts and the grounding praxis of reading and rereading is what ultimately determines any legitimate theology. This does not mean that concepts that operate outside the strict limits of that praxis cannot be brought in to make the rationality of the biblical texts and concepts explicit. Of course they can. It is just that it is necessary to make a critical distinction between the actual source of knowledge and the tools by which we come to grasp that knowledge in the most precise form.

As Barth writes: "We speak of God's beauty only in explanation of His glory. It is therefore, a subordinate and auxiliary idea which enables us to achieve a specific clarification and emphasis. With the help of it we are able to dissipate even the suggestion that God's glory is a mere fact, or a fact which is effective merely through God's power, a formless and shapeless fact. It is not this. It is effective because and as it is beautiful. This explanation as such is not merely legitimate. It is necessary."⁸² This underscores the value of the distinction between the two forms of speculation that

⁷⁹ Barth, *Dogmatik II,1*, 733ff; *Dogmatics II,1*, 650.

⁸⁰ Barth also calls theology "the most beautiful of all the sciences" (Barth, *Dogmatik II,1*, 740; *Dogmatics II,1*, 656).

⁸¹ Barth, *Dogmatik II,1*, 736; *Dogmatics II,1*, 652.

⁸² Barth, *Dogmatik II,1*, 736; *Dogmatics II,1*, 653.

Barth invokes—one positive and the other negative. They are distinguished by the fact that a legitimate speculative theology must necessarily make this distinction between grounding concepts and clarifying concepts or ideas, and make it explicitly. Insofar as the distinction is intuitive and obvious in the presentation, and the leading concepts are explicitly derived from the texts and the praxis, then it is free to follow lines of inference beyond the specific wording of the texts and uncover deeper structural necessities. That is, it is free to be speculative in this sense as well as by expressing the form of certain knowledge.

T. I want to be clear and stress that Barth does not develop a theological aesthetic in this meditation on beauty as the form of revelation. Ultimately, I want to use his account of the beauty of God to suggest a way in which Barth's theology is reflected in a particular aesthetic. That is not Barth's project, but mine. Barth is focused primarily on using the idea of beauty to demonstrate how God's revelation brings joy and, by means of this joy, persuades.⁸³

Still, as Kant taught us, when we judge something to be beautiful we are not applying a concept in the same way as when we say that something is "hot" or "round." Since beauty expresses an idea, there are no precise rules that can determine what is and is not beautiful in advance of the actual praxis of beholding and engaging with a beautiful object. The beautiful object is beautiful precisely because it concretely draws us into an exercise of all our discursive powers that is free, open-ended, and therefore enlightening as it expands the reach of our concepts.⁸⁴ In other words, beauty appeals to our common sense as discursive creatures and gives expression to the freedom and playfulness of our capacities as self-conscious beings. It draws us into a form of joyous and lively conversation, which includes exercising reason and judgment without predetermined rules. Barth makes a very similar argument addressing the "method" of his meditation: "It belongs to the nature of the subject that the real proof of our statement that God is beautiful can be provided neither by few nor by many words about this beauty, but only by this beauty itself, God's being itself speaks for His beauty in His revelation. All we can do here is

⁸³ Barth, *Dogmatik II,1*, 738ff; *Dogmatics II,1*, 655.

⁸⁴ "The aesthetic appeals to the human being as a whole insofar as it is a field that brings together all of that being's higher capacities to work or, should one say play, together." Eli Friedlander, *Expressions of Judgment: An Essay on Kant's Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 10.

to indicate by several *examples* the fact that this is so, or rather in view of certain decisive features of the Christian knowledge of God to put the question whether what is known in it, quite apart from anything else, is not simply beautiful."⁸⁵ To speak of the beauty of God requires reasoned discourse and judgment that is experimental and open rather than systematic. God's beauty practically undermines the temptation to appeal to a form of totality. It persuades by opening up for discourse and conversation without aiming towards comprehensiveness.

In these last sections, I will follow Barth's open invitation to consider the beauty of God and thus the beauty of theology. I will briefly review his examples expressing the beauty of God. I will then take the argument in a slightly different direction and use the works of the Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich to argue that Barth's theology, when viewed in its speculative aspect, finds a complement in Friedrich's art.

U. The first example Barth invokes underscores the openness and plasticity that is essential in discourse about beauty. This form of openness follows from the acknowledgment that God is unconditionally who God is in all God's acts and manifestations. Even if radically transcendent, God's unity is the only true form of unity available to be conceived of (however dimly). As parts of creation, our relation to God's unity is always practically mediated and inherently provisional.

Earlier in this chapter, we considered this aspect of God's being in relation to God's freedom. Where we might initially assume that some expression of God's being implies a contradiction or opposition, the form of God's revelation entails that God's unity is nonetheless fully to be affirmed—albeit outside our grasp (as captured in the formula *id quo maius cogitari nequit*). As Barth writes: "The form of the perfect being of God is, as we have seen all along, the wonderful, constantly mysterious and no less constantly evident unity of identity and non-identity, simplicity and multiplicity, inward and outward."⁸⁶ Here again, the form of our knowledge signals an explicit acknowledgment of the limits of our capacity to comprehensively grasp and unify.

Yet, as we saw in Barth's account of the freedom of God, God's revelation as the one who loves in freedom through Jesus Christ entails unconditionally affirming God in all God's various manifestations and acts as witnessed in the biblical texts. The logical force of that affirmation

⁸⁵ Barth, *Dogmatik II,1*, 741; *Dogmatics II,1*, 657 (Barth's emphasis).

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

overrides the possibility of entertaining doubt or reluctance in committing to God's glory, embracing both the lowest and the highest moments of existence.

Furthermore, each of God's perfections is uniquely different from the others, yet each of them also complements and reaffirms the others. The believer thus finds him or herself engaged in a form of stringent thought that holds together various forms of perfection without these being subsumed by a general concept or system.⁸⁷ In other words, God's form is the source of an engagement that takes the shape of an open-ended discourse on expressions of perfection. The discourse is free from anxiety and doubt, and is inherently affirmative.⁸⁸ As such, God's form generates a discourse that is best described as a discourse on beauty as outlined by Kant: a pleasing and persuasive form of discourse that cannot be systematized. As Barth writes: "How could it be otherwise than that when the perfect divine being declares itself, it also radiates joy in the dignity and power of its divinity, and thus releases the pleasure, desire and enjoyment of which we have spoken, it is in this way, by means of this form, persuasive and convincing? How can this persuasive and convincing form not be called the beauty of God?"⁸⁹

Barth's second example explicitly takes up the form of the Trinity of God. Here Barth narrows in on God as a living, self-affirming subject. As free, loving, and Triune God's life is neither self-enclosed nor a pure and abstract existence. Rather, it is a living, affirmative unity of simplicity and multiplicity, of seemingly heterogeneous moments held together without dissolution or contradiction. Here again, we find that the attempt to systematize breaks down.

In his wonderful essay on Kant's aesthetics Eli Friedlander writes: "The identity of the beautiful, *what* it is that is beautiful, is revealed in the gathering power of beauty. Beauty can gather within itself irreducible dimensions of meaning, thus making the beautiful thing into their meeting point. To allow beauty to be such a meeting point requires not reducing it to one register of significance (i.e. not determining it under a concept)... Beauty draws us in by drawing things together."⁹⁰ This is what the triune subjectivity of God does. In its self-affirmation, the unsubstatable

⁸⁷ "... *Jedes System sprengend ...*" (Barth, *Dogmatik II,1*, 742; *Dogmatics II,1*, 658).

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Barth, *Dogmatik II,1*, 743; *Dogmatics II,1*, 659.

⁹⁰ Friedlander, *Expressions of Judgment*, 43.

subjectivity of God draws the human subject into a form of thought and discourse that gathers various registers of significance in a way that is not reductive but affirmative—even unconditionally so. Although we are precluded from bringing the various moments into a synthesis, this does not reflect any inadequacy of the object or our discursive power. It reflects the open and engaging nature of this particular form of knowledge and engagement. As such, the form of revelation perfectly expresses the inner life of the Trinity, which—as we have seen throughout—enlightens, persuades, and convinces. Barth: “It attracts and therefore it conquers. It is, therefore, beautiful. But it is this, as we must affirm, because it reflects the triune being of God... To this extent the triunity of God is the secret of His beauty.”⁹¹

The final example is the incarnation. Here the stress is on the way God’s divinity “overflows in its glory.”⁹² Of course, the knowledge that we have of the form of God, and hence our encounter with the beauty of God, is completely conditioned on this moment of God’s gracious self-differentiation in becoming a human being in the man, Jesus Christ. In it we encounter a seamlessness in God’s self-affirmation in Jesus of Nazareth that manifests a form of being that is without tension, dialectic, paradox, or contradiction.⁹³ Grace can also denote an aspect of beauty, when it is executed in a seamless and elegant act. When God turns to the world in Jesus Christ and raises humanity up to be the crown of creation, the grace of that act manifests a form of beauty. In this movement, God is One and yet another without confusion or alteration or separation or division.⁹⁴ As such, God’s incarnation is the paradigm example of a free and loving act executed with perfect grace: it is beautiful. Barth: “What is reflected in this determination of the relationship between the divine and the human nature in Jesus Christ is the form, the beautiful form of the divine being. In this way, in this rest and movement, God is the triune, and He has and is the divine being in the unity and fullness of its determinations. Because He is this in this way, He is not only the source of all truth and all goodness, but also the source of all beauty.”⁹⁵ As a singularly beautiful act the incarnation undermines any attempt to give it a determinate place in a systematic totality. Its beauty lies in always exceeding such determination.

⁹¹ Barth, *Dogmatik II,1*, 745; *Dogmatics II,1*, 661.

⁹² Barth, *Dogmatik II,1*, 746ff; *Dogmatics II,1*, 662.

⁹³ Barth, *Dogmatik II,1*, 748; *Dogmatics II,1*, 663.

⁹⁴ Barth, *Dogmatik II,1*, 748ff; *Dogmatics II,1*, 664.

⁹⁵ Barth, *Dogmatik II,1*, 749; *Dogmatics II,1*, 664.

It is necessary to stress again that these examples illustrate how the form of God's essence and act is beautiful. Ultimately, the encounter with the beauty of God comes from the actual engagement with God's revelation. It is practically mediated as the acknowledgment of God's revelation in the biblical scriptures and gives rise to a form of joy in the free and open-ended exercise of our intellectual capacities, which draws us in.⁹⁶ It is in the very form of theological discourse—its concrete praxis and formation of concepts—that the beauty of God is experienced, acknowledged, and potentially expressed. And it is expressed to the extent that it is recognized that theology is a rigorously rational, yet free and open-ended, form of intellectual engagement, which does not degenerate into a system, or some other form of this-worldly totality. The way theology gives expression to the overwhelming and overflowing freedom and grace of God and thus invigorates the rationality and intellectual freedom of the self-conscious subject gives theology its special form. As Barth points out: "At this point we may refer to the fact that if its task is correctly seen and grasped, theology as a whole, in its parts and in their interconnection, in its content and method, is, apart from anything else, a particularly beautiful science."⁹⁷

V. In my reading of Eduard Thurneysen's *Dostoevsky* in Chap. 4, I invoked a distinction between Christian thought and writing and theology. Theology, I argued, is defined by an explicit engagement with biblical scripture. Christian thought, I argued, explores the form in which everyday thought and action presents itself, when seen in light of the Christian revelation; it examines what is entailed in the concept of faith; it provides poetic accounts of how human self-conscious life is lived in relation to God. I also argued that the boundary between theology and Christian thought is fluid.

Although I did not explicitly make the point in Chap. 4, it seems to me that there is a close relationship between Christian thought and aesthetics. For example, a painter may be a Christian thinker, if he or she develops forms of aesthetic expression that expand our understanding of the world and ourselves in light of the revelation of God. In this sense, the domain

⁹⁶ Karl Barth, *Karl Barth Gesamtausgabe—Fides quaerens intellectum: Anselms Beweis für die Existenz Gottes, 1931*, ed. Eberhard Jüngel & Ingolf U. Dalferth, (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1981), 13; *Fides Quaerens Intellectum: Anselm's Proof of the Existence of God in the Context of his Theological Scheme*, (London: SCM Press, 1960), 15.

⁹⁷ Barth, *Dogmatik II,1*, 740; *Dogmatics II,1*, 656.

of aesthetics functions in principle outside the scope of theology—even if theology can itself be beautiful. Again, here the lines can be blurred and a painter such as Lukas Cranach the Elder might also to some extent be considered a theologian, insofar as a number of his paintings explicitly mediate biblical texts. On the other hand, we have a painter like Caspar David Friedrich, who did not paint any biblical motifs, although his art is steeped in protestant Christianity.

I have also argued that there is a recognizable relationship between Barth's early theology and the aesthetic of Dostoyevsky's writings. Thurneysen's book and Barth's own comments make this connection explicit. In that connection, Thurneysen also invokes the paintings of El Greco, which play with perspective in such a way that the portrayed person is stretched out towards a transcendent point outside the picture, signaling a striving and yearning for transcendence. I want to push some of these aesthetic observations even further. Thus, in the remainder of this chapter, I argue that Caspar David Friedrich's paintings can be seen to give visual expression to some central aspects of Barth's speculative theology.

Before I do, however, I want to address one specific concern: the reformed churches have a strong iconoclastic tradition and Barth is one of the greatest reformed theologians and, as such, shares the tendency towards iconoclasm. We see this expressed in the section on the beauty of God, where Barth argues that recognizing the beauty of God in the man Jesus Christ is an intellectual acknowledgment of the human suffering of the true God and the divine glory of the true man. The singular nature of this event undermines the attempt to represent it, since any such representation must make some use of general ideas. Barth writes: "No human art should try to represent—in their unity—the suffering God and triumphant man, the beauty of God which is the beauty of Jesus Christ. If we at this point have one urgent request to all Christian artists, however well-intentioned, gifted or even possessed of genius, it is that they should give up this unholy undertaking—for the sake of God's beauty. This picture, the one true picture, both in object and representation cannot be copied, for the express reason that it speaks for itself, even in its beauty."⁹⁸ The stress on the singularity underscores the impossibility of iconography, since it cannot but turn into a misrepresentation. Here a misrepresentation entails missing the true form of God's revelation and thus removing oneself from the praxis that yields knowledge of God.

⁹⁸ Barth, *Dogmatik II,1*, 751; *Dogmatics II,1*, 666.

The Harvard University art historian Joseph Leo Koerner has convincingly argued that the reformation art of Lukas Cranach the Elder incorporates the Protestant iconoclasm.⁹⁹ The relationship between iconoclasm and iconography is much more complex than it appears to be on the surface. In other words, there are techniques by which the negation of images can be represented through images themselves. Furthermore, Koerner has pointed out that Friedrich's paintings inscribe themselves in precisely this post-iconoclastic tradition of Protestant art: "Friedrich and Cranach, it seemed, addressed the same question: How visually to represent a hidden God? ... Both [Cranach's Wittenberg altarpiece and Friedrich's *Cross in the Mountains*] were post-iconoclastic icons. Both utilized the crucifix simultaneously to arrest and repeat the hammer-blow that gave them space."¹⁰⁰

In Friedrich's own design for the renovation of a church in Stralsund, he imagines "an image-free interior reduced to its functional parts (altar, font and pulpit) and sanctified only through the activities of the preacher and his flock ... Friedrich remained ... powerfully drawn to the absence iconoclasm engendered."¹⁰¹ In this sense, Friedrich's paintings are not precluded from giving expression to the insights contained in an otherwise iconoclastic theology. In fact, it is precisely the form of a negation of a particular form of positive Christian imagery that fuels Friedrich's religious art. It is the relationship between this negativity, the role of self-conscious subjectivity, and the divine in Friedrich's art that makes it so well suited for visually conveying nuances of the speculative aspect of Barth's theological thought.

W. It is possible to understand Caspar David Friedrich as a German Idealist in his own right. As Hölderlin's poetry straddles the Romantic and the Idealistic movements in Germany, so do Friedrich's paintings. Certainly, there are differences. Where Hölderlin uses the classical Greek poetic form to reinvigorate German art in the wake of German Idealism, Friedrich's work seeks to inscribe itself in the Nordic Protestant tradition. It is here that Friedrich's paintings explicitly draw on its philosophical context and the new philosophical grasp of the role of subjectivity:

⁹⁹ Joseph Leo Koerner, *The Reformation of the Image* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008).

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁰¹ Joseph Leo Koerner, *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape* (London: Reaktion Books, 2014), 300.

“Friedrich’s landscapes are perhaps the most consciously subjective works of art before our century. Which is to say: as speculative Idealism’s proper pictorial incarnation they represent the ‘subject’ not as mere substance presentable to itself, as in the Cartesian *cogito* or, for that matter, the self-portraits of a Rembrandt or a Dürer, but as *function* of the cognition of appearances.”¹⁰² In this sense, it is the viewing, self-conscious subject itself that is thematized in Friedrich’s paintings, where the contradictions and constitutions of our subjectivity are explicitly reflected.¹⁰³

For example, in his reading of *Cross in the Mountains*, Koerner points out that Friedrich consciously undermines the self-contained unity that the picture appears to represent. What we take in as viewers might immediately seem to present a self-consistent representation of a landscape, but on closer inspection this seeming unity quickly fragments: “Beheld from a distance, *Cross in the Mountains* seems indeed to position us outside the spaceless landscape, in a place always too high and too low. But observed from nearby, the canvas’s surface appears decorated with an assemblage of objects, each so detailed that it draws preternaturally close to us. Trapped within a play between proximity and distance, familiarity and estrangement, presence and absence, the microscopic and the colossal, we *ourselves* become discontinuous, able neither to enter into the represented world, nor to observe it as a whole, from some standpoint *sub specie aeternitatis*.”¹⁰⁴ In *Cross in the Mountains*, the viewing subject is reflected as unable to fully comprehend what confronts it. An essential aspect of what is revealed in the encounter with the cross is thus the subject’s own lack of unity and consistency. True, transcendent unity is suggested by the light that shines from behind the peak on which the cross stands, lighting up the face of the mounted Christ.

The subject is at once fully engaged—not as a substance, but *qua* its intellectual capacities—and determined as limited, encountering a transcendence that is always beyond reach. Friedrich’s use of *rückenfigur* underscores this aspect of transcendence. A fuller and more comprehensive view is often present in his paintings, but barred in some way either by physical obstacles or by some other “subject” that occupies the position. In Friedrich’s paintings we encounter the world with our subjectivity included in it, but always as limited and fragmented.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 90 (author’s emphasis).

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 103.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 122.

Now this encounter with the limits of subjectivity also relates to the emphasis on absence that characterizes Friedrich's paintings. His paintings are defined as much by what is not in them as what is. "Before Caspar David Friedrich, no major Western artist had fashioned canvases as empty as these."¹⁰⁵ In his work, Friedrich registers the presence of God by means of a void. By making this constitutive absence explicit, the entire painting becomes suffused with religious sense. We see the world—not as God sees it, nor with God present in it—but represented as a world in which the thought of God is available everywhere, although *nothing* concretely leads from the world to God. It is an image of the world from the point of view of a theology of creation that explicitly negates "natural theology." As Koerner puts it: "Friedrich empties his canvas in order to imagine, through an invocation of the void, an infinite, unrepresentable God."¹⁰⁶ This void also takes the shape of an invocation of mortality. For example, in *Mist* we vaguely see the contours of a ship taking off from the shore and a pair of crutches left behind, signaling the final, albeit healing, journey into the unknown.

In *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, Barth wrote of Novalis that "the emphasis with which here just things Christian become a symbol, and the proximity in which things Christian find themselves to the critical concept of death, would remain striking and singular, even if our final judgment must be that in the last resort the riddle of death has been juggled away once more and that Christianity has yet again been interpreted in humanistic terms."¹⁰⁷ I think that in Friedrich's art we find an even more striking and singular example of Christian thought and symbols operating in proximity to the critical concept of death and the void. Moreover, the tendency to slip into a form of humanism is less conspicuous in Friedrich than in Novalis. At the very least, by Barth's own lights, the same positive judgment should apply to Friedrich as to Novalis, not least insofar as Novalis's friend and fellow Romantic, Ludwig Tieck, argued that Friedrich had made Novalis's ideas largely a reality.¹⁰⁸

These are merely suggestions of ways in which we may notice a set of overlapping themes in Barth and Friedrich. Even so, I submit that Friedrich's work captures important theological insights better than does

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ Karl Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century* (London: SCM Press, 2001), 368.

¹⁰⁸ Koerner, *Friedrich*, 29.

Novalis's poetry (as wonderful as that otherwise is) and thus proves an even better expression of the form of Christian thought that preempts the advent of Barth's speculative theology.

Unfortunately, as far as I know, Barth never mentions Friedrich. I cannot help thinking that this was a missed opportunity. Many of the themes and conversations that make Barth's work so interesting and powerful find an aesthetic expression in the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich. Like the speculative theology of Marheineke and Dorner, Friedrich's paintings may provide us with a concrete way of bringing Barth's theology and the thought of the German Idealists together. Moreover, they also provide a potential visual expression of a way of viewing the world as God's creation in light of Barth's speculative theology. Friedrich presents us with a fragmented and finite world—but also a world that appears to us as redeemed and as everywhere open to the revelation of God.

In *Kirchliche Dogmatik II,1* Barth writes: "Where there is light and light shines, there is an illuminating and an illumination. This means that another object is illuminated which is not light in itself and which could not be light without being illuminated. Where there is radiance there is also reflection of the radiance."¹⁰⁹ Caspar David Friedrich's paintings and Karl Barth's speculative theology are both lenses through which we can see the glory of the triune God, who loves in freedom, reflected, and thus see our world truly illuminated.

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Conclusion

*During that period Thurneysen once even broached the strange question of whether we shouldn't study Hegel. But nothing came of that then.
Karl Barth, Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Schleiermacher*

Hegel famously wrote in the preface to the *Philosophy of Right*: that the owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of dusk. In retrospect, we come to learn what we actually accomplished. I have written about the speculative aspect of Karl Barth's theology and the role of the self-conscious, human subject. I find it appropriate to reflect on the extent to which I have been able to lend a voice to Barth's theology. Did I accomplish what I wanted to accomplish, namely, to allow Barth's voice to be heard in a way in which in my view it had never fully been heard?

In asking this question, I am asking whether my interpretation of Barth's theology amounts to a form of subjective imposition, a distortion of his theology. I have argued that we can read Barth's theology as speculative at its core. I acknowledge that he almost never explicitly expressed that commitment himself. I have stressed where he does commit himself to a form of speculative theology, and I have given reasons for his skepticism concerning "speculation," when that shows up in his texts.

In short, my answer to the question whether my reading amounts to a subjective imposition is "no." Barth's theology can be approached from a variety of directions that more or less directly take the reader to the heart

of his thought. As I have shown throughout, my approach follows a straight line to the heart of his thinking. Of course, I am writing a hundred years after Barth offered his first essential theological insights in “The New World in the Bible” in 1917. Obviously, his situation is not mine. Still, I feel much as he felt after having written his book on Anselm: “Who can read with other eyes than one’s own? With that reservation, I maintain that I have not put anything forward here, which I did not read in Anselm.”¹ For my part, with that reservation, I maintain that I have not put anything forward here which I did not find in Barth.

I have argued that there are three distinct if related uses of the concept of speculative theology. The first regards it as a form of theology which, as Peter Widmann put it, reflects on all-encompassing structural necessities. Anselm of Canterbury’s various theological works, his *Cur Deus Homo* in particular, provide the paradigm example of this form of theology. We find the second use of speculative theology in the work of theologians of the nineteenth century whose thought explicitly reflected the philosophical revolution of German Idealism. These theologians took up the challenges that German Idealism posed and sought to mediate the paramount insight of Protestant theology in this new intellectual situation. Marheineke and Dorner are two of the most interesting and successful representatives of this theological movement. The third use of speculative theology concerns the status of the form of knowledge. We find this use explicitly in Hegel’s work. There the predicate “speculative” signifies that the form of knowing is certain, immune to skepticism, subjectivism, and relativism. It is knowledge as knowledge and is therefore absolute.

Karl Barth’s mature theology is explicitly informed by the theology of Anselm of Canterbury. Recognizing Anselm’s technique of making the immanent structural necessity of theological propositions explicit and thus giving them a rational, if plastic, form provided Barth with a new level of clarity concerning his own approach to dogmatic theology.

Throughout his work, from the earliest dialectical–theological texts, Barth thinks and works in light of the challenges that German Idealism poses to theology. The nexus of freedom, reason, and self-consciousness constantly informs his thinking. One of the defining features of Barth’s theological development is the recognition that his initial solution to the

¹Karl Barth, *Karl Barth Gesamtausgabe – Fides quaerens intellectum: Anselms Beweis für die Existenz Gottes, 1931*, ed. Eberhard Jüngel and Ingolf U. Dalferth (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1981), 4.

Idealist challenge throws the baby out with the bathwater and threatens to collapse his own hard-won insights into another form of subjectivism. The rational capacity of the self-conscious subject cannot be brutally negated without undermining the true knowledge of God obtained through the theological praxis. Reason must in and of itself be brought within the scope of the acknowledgment of the unconditional sovereignty of God.

By applying the form of theological reasoning he discovered in Anselm to the problem of affirming the self-conscious capacity to reason within the scope of the knowledge of revelation, the form of theological knowing that Barth is able to develop proves immune to subjectivism, skepticism, and doubt. Thus, it becomes speculative in the Hegelian sense.

Barth and Thurneysen did not take up Hegel in the early days of dialectical theology. Perhaps they should have. Perhaps not. Either way, it is striking that Barth ends up adopting principles that are so close to the fundamental Hegelian insights that represent the epistemological culmination of German Idealism. Certainly, Barth's theology is not Hegelian. It even challenges some of Hegel's own conclusions insofar as the theologian is able to speak sensibly about the limits to power of self-consciousness (and thus the limit of the world), something that Hegel would not have thought possible. Yet, Barth's theology can also be taken as a form of thought that leaves the essence of the Hegelian framework intact and even complements it by showing how theology unfolds as a distinct but related speculative praxis in its own right. I take it as one of the important claims of this book that one can be committed both to Barth's theological insights and praxis and to the basic framework of Hegelian speculative philosophy without contradiction.

Barth's theology cannot be understood unless one takes the nexus of freedom, reason, and self-consciousness into account. He is *the* theologian of freedom. Everything hinges on taking the freedom of the sovereign God and the freedom of the responsible human being seriously, as Barth put it in a late interview for Swiss television. For my part, I doubt that anyone has ever been able to speak and think as freely and engagingly about freedom as Karl Barth. That alone makes his theology indispensable today.

Reason affirms and is affirmed by the revelation of the Word of God in Jesus Christ, and this allows us to recognize, with Barth, that theology is, perhaps, *the* discourse of freedom. Concretely, this manifests itself in a form of speculative reading. At its core, it is expressed by a logic of affirmation that Barth discovers by engaging with the works of Anselm of

Canterbury. This rationally mediated form of affirmation flows out of the revelation of the unconditioned sovereignty and freedom of God, revealed in the Son of God, Jesus Christ. It provides the human, conceptual form of God's unoblatable subjectivity, the triune God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Finally, to think in light of the Trinity of God is to engage in a form of thought that is essentially practical, alive, and open.

As Sebastian Rödl wrote, self-consciousness is knowledge of oneself as oneself.² In Chap. 1, I asked whether the self-consciousness of the engaged theologian is distinct. The answer: it depends. Self-consciousness is self-consciousness, yet there is a way in which a self-consciously acquired knowledge of God does make a difference. In everything he or she does, the self-conscious believer is accompanied by the certain knowledge of an unoblatable openness and presence, a concrete knowledge of a freedom that transcends all immediately given conditions and possibilities, because it rests in God, who loves in freedom and therefore is the one above whom nothing greater can be conceived. In the words of the epistle to the Hebrews in the King James Version: "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." To have this knowledge makes a significant difference for our lives as self-conscious subjects—both practically and theoretically.

Now as Barth argued in his reflections on the beauty of God, theology is a beautiful and joyous science. When it comes to beauty there is always more to say, further conversations to be had. Therefore, I would like to close this book by mentioning three topics or paths that I would like to have addressed but could not find the space or the time to take up in the detail they deserved.

The first of these topics is creation. Early in the *Kirchliche Dogmatik III,1* there is a fascinating discussion of Anselm's proof in relation to Descartes's ontological proof. This discussion dovetails nicely with my entire argument in this book. Unfortunately, it would have taken me too far off course to show how we might understand creation as revelation in light of the speculative logic of affirmation.

The second topic is Pneumatology. In some ways, Barth's theological testament is his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Schleiermacher*. There he ends by broaching the subject of developing a theology that begins with the third article of the Apostles' Creed, something he never did himself. The reflections concerning the role of self-conscious subjectivity and praxis

²Sebastian Rödl, *Self-consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), vii.

in relation to the revelation of God as I have developed it here lends itself to further development, perhaps even into a full-blooded Pneumatological study. Again, such a task was beyond the scope of this book.

The third topic I might like to have explored is Barth's relation to Romanticism. Surely a deeper study of the relationship between Barth's theology and art is called for, especially one that addresses his appreciation and use of poetry and ties this back to his own form of writing. Perhaps the first step in such an effort would be to examine his relationship with Romanticism and his love of Novalis in particular. On that note, I feel it is appropriate to close this book on Karl Barth's speculative theology by letting Barth ask an intriguing question, which in one way or another has been in the background throughout: "Was I (am I!) a bit of a Romantic myself?"³

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INDEX¹

A

Acknowledgment, 23, 90, 129, 138,
140, 141n72, 143, 147, 148,
152, 154–158, 162, 163, 165,
179, 181, 182, 236–238, 243,
264, 269, 272, 273, 281
Aesthetics, 27, 28, 52, 54, 57, 59, 62,
232, 270, 272, 273
Affirmation
of God, 157, 180, 184, 189, 210,
219, 233, 235, 240, 242,
244, 264
self-affirmation, 181, 182, 184, 186,
186n20, 239, 242, 246, 248,
250, 251n48, 254, 257,
261–264, 270, 271
Analogy (genus), 11, 12, 22n41, 59,
60, 123, 213
of being (species), 11
of faith (species), 160, 163, 182,
223, 261

Anselme, G. E. M., 104n92
Anselm, of Canterbury, 2, 4, 10, 13,
27, 171, 175, 190, 191, 214,
227, 233, 242, 250, 255, 259,
280, 281
Art, 27, 58n68, 59, 60, 213, 269,
273–276, 283
Attributes, 27, 55, 206, 261, 262

B

Barth, Karl, 1, 7, 33, 69, 115–169,
171–228, 231–277
Beauty, 27, 58–62, 58n65, 232, 252,
265–273, 282
Belief, 17n24, 20, 24, 84, 118, 174n3
Believer, 118n5, 144n81, 195, 199,
205, 211, 212, 235, 237, 238,
242, 270, 282
Brandom, Robert, 40n15, 43,
43n25, 50

¹Note: Page numbers followed by “n” refer to notes.

Brunner, Emil, 133, 191, 226,
227n106
Bultmann, Rudolph, vii, ix, 34,
34n4, 221

C

Capacities
rational, 203, 246, 249
subjective, 142
Causality, 38–41, 45–47, 46n30,
51–54, 51n46, 64, 66, 173
Christology, 14n17, 146, 168,
247, 252
Cognition, 52n47, 56, 64, 83, 275
Commentary
biblical, 21n37, 33, 35, 131, 164
Romans, 20, 33, 116, 121,
122, 124
Concept, conceptual, x, 2, 10, 35, 70,
117, 171, 231, 280
Consciousness, 33, 35, 42, 52, 72n6,
73, 80, 83, 84, 86–94, 87n41,
88n44, 88n45, 89n47, 92n55,
103, 105, 177, 205, 208, 209,
216, 249, 260
Contradiction, 14, 26, 48, 49, 75,
76n21, 86, 87, 87n40, 152, 153,
157, 177, 178, 184, 185,
210–212, 215, 218, 234,
269–271, 275, 281
Covenant, 238
Creation, 143, 144, 153, 161, 237,
240, 245, 247, 250, 252, 255,
261, 264, 269, 271, 276, 277, 282
Creator, 182, 220, 237, 238, 242, 264
Critique, criticism, 4, 18, 23, 25,
99, 117, 145, 146, 166, 175,
208n64

D

Death
of Jesus, 149, 152, 183, 247
knowledge of, 80, 81, 84, 90–92,
126, 127, 139–141, 144–146,
150, 158–161, 164, 195, 219
as limit, 80, 81, 84, 119, 120, 124,
126, 128, 141, 143–145, 150,
164, 168
recognition of, 126, 130
Dialectic
conceptual, 15n20
real (*realdialektik*), 14
Dialectical
philosophy, 10, 117, 118, 132, 145,
151, 164, 166, 197, 281
praxis, 9, 118, 120, 122, 125, 128,
129, 142, 146, 148, 151, 152,
154–159, 162–164, 166–168,
231, 281
reading, 15n20, 98, 117, 118,
120–122, 124, 132, 133,
136, 137, 142, 146, 147,
150, 156–158, 162, 163,
166, 169
theology, xi, 3, 4, 7, 9, 13, 15, 18,
19n31, 35n5, 115–169
thought, x, xi, 10, 115, 120,
123–126, 128–132, 135, 137,
140, 141, 145, 148, 151,
163–167, 169, 231, 281
Dorner, I. A., 5, 226, 227, 232, 260,
262–264, 262n68, 277, 280
Dostoyevsky, Fyodor, 22, 23,
27, 273
Doubt, xii, 2, 3, 36–38, 36n7, 41,
120, 173, 197, 221, 223–225,
233–235, 243, 255, 257, 261,
270, 281

E

- Election, 4, 14n17, 247–250,
252–260, 263
- Epistemology, 16n21, 16n22, 23, 35,
47, 62, 205, 214, 216
- Ethics, 35, 62, 163
- Exegesis, 12n12, 21, 121, 143, 165,
251, 251n48, 252, 254
- Experience, 11, 13n15, 16, 33, 38–43,
39n14, 40n15, 46, 48, 48n34,
52, 54, 55, 57, 58, 59n71,
60, 62–66, 71, 74, 75, 77, 79,
84, 86–90, 99, 100, 124–126,
128, 140, 157, 195n34, 200,
202, 232

F

- Faith, 3, 17n24, 34, 129, 135, 142,
143, 155–161, 163, 182, 190,
194–196, 195n34, 198, 199,
204, 204n54, 207, 211, 212,
219, 221, 223, 225, 253, 254,
256, 261, 262, 272, 282
- Fichte, J. G., 33–66, 69–110
- Freedom
of God, 27, 110, 161, 177, 228,
239, 241–243, 245, 247, 250,
257, 264, 269, 282
of self-consciousness, 62
- Friedrich, Caspar David, 35, 269, 273,
274, 276, 277

G

- German Idealism
Fichte, J. G., 76, 81
Friedrich, Caspar David, 274
Hegel, G. W. F., 2
Kant, Immanuel, 2, 35

- Glory, 122n14, 155, 246n35,
265–267, 270, 271, 273, 277
- Gogarten, Friedrich, 34, 34n3

H

- Hegel, G. W. F., xi, 2, 10, 35, 69–110,
115, 172, 244
- Holy Spirit, 16, 118n5, 185, 204n54,
227, 260n63, 282

I

- Idealism, 37, 40n15, 65, 65n81, 69,
71, 76, 197, 275
German, xi, xii, 1, 2, 9, 9n5, 11, 24,
25n43, 26, 27, 35, 37, 53, 66,
69, 76, 79, 81, 82, 93, 104, 109,
116, 162, 166, 172–178, 224,
226, 258, 260, 274, 280, 281
- Imagination, 35, 39, 47, 55–57, 57n61,
57n62, 57n63, 59, 60, 76–78
- Immutability, 232, 262, 263
- Inter-subjective, 13n15, 19, 20, 24,
43, 44, 51, 52, 60, 78, 79, 90,
107, 197, 199, 242

J

- Jesus Christ
death of, 149, 152, 183, 247
election of, 253
obedientia passiva, 160, 163, 247
revelation of, 164, 182, 218, 238,
241, 247, 264
- Judgment
critical, 50, 52, 54, 57, 58, 60, 120,
152, 166, 177, 251, 276
normative, 99, 177, 178
Value of, 234

K

Kant, Immanuel, 2, 13n15, 33–66,
69, 116, 173, 258

Knowledge

death, 80, 81, 84, 90–92, 126, 127,
139–141, 144–146, 150,
158–161, 164, 195, 219

of god, 3, 17, 17n24, 129, 137,
144, 156, 159, 161, 163, 176,
185, 203, 210, 221–224, 228,
233–237, 235n6, 239, 240,
243, 244, 246, 248, 253, 255,
261, 262, 266, 267, 269, 273,
281, 282

of oneself, 9, 282

Koerner, Joseph Leo, 27, 274–276,
274n99, 274n101, 276n108

L

Language

about God, 207, 210, 262, 266, 267
philosophy of, 43, 176
theological, 7, 8

Love, 3, 5, 6, 81, 119, 147, 154, 161,
191, 195, 239–242, 250, 251,
257, 263, 264, 283

M

Marheineke, P. K., 222, 225–227,
260, 261, 277, 280

McCormack, Bruce L., xi, xin6, 4,
13–23, 13–14n15, 14n16,
14n17, 15n19, 15n20, 16n21,
16n22, 16–17n24, 17n25,
18n26, 18n29, 19n31, 20n33,
20n35, 21n36, 21n37, 26n45,
121n13, 122n14, 193, 193n30,
255, 256, 256n57, 258

McDowell, John Henry, 19, 20n32,
65n81, 84n31, 86n38, 103n89,
106, 106n99, 107, 215n81

Metaphysics, 75, 83, 84n30, 94, 95n63,
104, 109, 154, 155, 163, 263
Morals, 46, 48–51, 53, 54, 60–62, 74,
126, 128, 223, 226, 238, 263

N

Negativity, 23, 75, 80, 91, 91n53,
97–99, 105, 107n103, 119–121,
124–128, 130, 132, 138, 141,
146–149, 151–155, 157, 166,
167, 169, 177, 180–182, 184,
190, 201, 219, 238, 251,
252, 274

unsublatable, 22, 141, 143, 150,
153, 159, 169, 179, 180, 205

Normativity, 41, 43, 81, 99, 100, 102,
109, 132, 145, 151, 152, 163,
166, 176–179, 228, 234

Novalis, (von Hardenberg, Friedrich),
7–28, 33–66, 69, 70, 79, 81,
81n26, 116–120, 119n7, 122,
130, 162, 276, 277, 283

O

Objectivity, 39, 40, 43, 50, 51, 54, 59,
78, 86n38, 89, 103, 104,
105n95, 152, 173, 198, 199,
201n48, 208, 209, 214, 216,
220, 221, 224, 236, 248, 253,
259, 261, 262

Overbeck, Franz, 138–143, 138n59,
139n61, 139n62, 140n64, 140n67,
141n70, 141n72, 142n73,
143n77, 145, 146, 161, 165

P

Pneumatology, 282

Poetry, 70, 81, 119, 274, 277, 283

Power

of God, 144, 266

- of judgement, 100
 of reason, 101
 of self-consciousness, 216, 243, 281
 of understanding, 79
- Practical**
 insight, 3, 12, 74, 126, 179–181,
 243, 263
 philosophy, 16, 52
 reflection, 50
 theology, 196
- Practice**, 7–10, 72, 91, 130, 146, 150,
 151, 173, 221
- Praxis**
 of reading, 3, 23, 24, 118, 118n5,
 120, 122, 142, 183, 187, 202,
 244, 259, 267
 and theory, 166, 167, 195
 of writing, 8
- Predestination**, 232, 247, 253, 257, 263
- Proof**, 3, 10, 13, 17, 18, 26, 27, 41,
 59, 75, 104, 105, 105n95, 171,
 190–197, 194n31, 205–228,
 233, 235, 239, 241, 242, 245,
 247, 268, 282
- Putnam, Hillary**, 106, 106n98, 106n99
- R**
- Rationality**, 20, 24, 27, 35, 52, 61, 63,
 66, 73, 77–79, 82, 104, 116, 117,
 155, 171, 182, 183, 189, 190,
 201, 204, 205, 212, 213, 220,
 223–225, 231, 233–235, 238,
 252, 254, 260, 264, 267, 272
- Reading**, xii, 3, 4, 15n20, 17, 18, 21,
 23–25, 33, 35, 41, 77, 81, 98,
 109, 117, 121, 122, 124, 132,
 133, 136, 137, 138n59, 142,
 146, 147, 150, 156–158, 162,
 163, 166, 172, 177, 178, 180,
 186, 188, 196, 197, 202,
 208n64, 219, 223, 224, 233,
 239, 246, 250, 252, 254, 256
- Realism**, 13, 13n15, 14, 19, 20n33,
 23, 24, 44, 78
- Reason**, ix, xii, 1, 2, 5, 8, 9, 11, 16,
 24, 27, 28, 35–37, 42, 44,
 46–55, 46n30, 48n34, 51n44,
 55n53, 58–63, 65, 66, 70, 74,
 75, 78, 79, 82, 87, 93, 94, 97,
 100–103, 103n92, 106–110,
 117, 118, 132, 135, 164, 166,
 174, 177, 178, 181, 182, 185,
 190, 195, 197–199, 202–204,
 210n69, 214n81, 217, 219,
 220, 224, 225, 234, 249, 250,
 255, 258, 259, 261, 263–265,
 268, 273, 279–281
- Recognition**, xi, 20, 22, 36, 63, 126,
 129, 130, 132, 133, 135–137,
 144, 146, 148, 154, 156, 157,
 176, 179, 181, 183, 184,
 202n49, 204, 205, 217, 220,
 221, 259, 260n63, 280
- Redemption**, 128, 158,
 160, 161
- Reflection**
 dialectical, 10, 101, 129, 134, 135,
 155, 197
 speculative, 8, 10, 20, 23–25, 27,
 177–180, 190, 195, 197, 199,
 200, 202, 210, 212, 216, 222,
 232, 242, 245, 247, 252, 253,
 261, 263, 265, 277
 reading and, 35, 177, 178, 197
- Revelation**, 2, 14n17, 16, 16n21,
 16n24, 17, 95n64, 120, 129,
 137, 138, 146, 149, 155,
 161–164, 172, 175, 176,
 178–191, 182n12, 195, 200,
 201, 203, 210, 216–221, 223,
 225–228, 233–248, 250, 251,
 255–262, 264, 266–269,
 271–273, 277, 281–283
- Rödl, Sebastian**, 9, 9n4, 9n5, 82,
 85n33, 93, 282, 282n2

S

- Schema, 56, 59, 60
- Schleiermacher, Friedrich, 16n21, 162–164, 282
- Scripture, 24, 129, 179, 180, 187, 196, 201, 228, 248, 272
 biblical, 129
 Holy, 188, 196, 248
- Self-consciousness, 2, 9, 11, 16, 27, 33–35, 38, 43, 44, 52, 61, 62, 69–110, 120, 121, 131, 162–164, 166, 176–178, 197, 201, 211, 212, 214, 216, 217, 220–222, 222n100, 224, 237, 247, 259, 280–282
- Sellars, Wilfrid, 39–40n15, 40n16, 45n29, 57, 57n59
- Skepticism, 2, 3, 10, 15, 19, 20n33, 25, 38, 39, 40n15, 41, 62–65, 78, 132, 139, 140, 145, 146, 174, 197, 210, 213, 214, 223, 225, 253, 262, 279–281
- Sovereignty
 of God, 62, 154, 155, 203, 217, 219, 249, 281
 of Self-consciousness, 62, 176, 178, 221
- Speculative theology, 2, 3, 5, 9–12, 19, 20, 24–27, 70, 81, 82, 104, 110, 115, 162, 171–228, 231–277, 279, 280, 283
- Speculative thought, 2, 10, 47, 175, 198, 224, 225, 231, 232
- Structure, 9, 15, 16, 19, 20, 23, 24, 26, 43, 50, 52, 60, 64, 65, 70, 71n1, 79, 81, 87n41, 91, 95, 98, 99, 107, 116, 138, 139, 142, 150, 152, 162, 164, 167, 168, 171–173, 175, 178, 180, 190, 196, 197, 199, 202, 204, 205, 231, 233, 254, 256, 259
- Subject, 1, 2, 9, 12, 16–18, 16n24, 20, 35–37, 39, 40, 42–51, 48n35, 53, 57n62, 58, 60, 62–66, 69, 70, 73–76, 78–83, 89, 93, 94, 96–98, 100, 102, 105–110, 116–128, 130–133, 136, 150–154, 156, 157, 159–161, 163, 165, 166, 174, 176–178, 180, 181, 182n12, 184–188, 186n19, 190, 197, 200, 209–212, 215n82, 216–218, 220, 221, 223, 225, 228, 232, 234, 236, 237, 244, 248, 249, 251–253, 255–257, 259–261, 264, 268, 270–272, 275, 279, 281, 282
- Subjectivity, x, 9, 16, 25n43, 27, 35, 39, 71n3, 78, 81, 82, 90, 96, 108, 109, 130, 131, 137, 151, 152, 155, 157, 159, 160, 167, 173–176, 181–183, 185, 186, 186n20, 189, 190, 197, 199, 201n48, 205, 216, 218, 220, 221, 224, 227, 236, 238, 242, 245, 246, 249, 250, 254, 256–259, 263, 266, 270, 271, 274–276, 282

T

Text

- of the Bible, 152, 166, 185, 187
- biblical, 3, 21, 21n36, 118, 120, 122, 130, 131, 133–137, 135n50, 142, 146, 149, 156, 177–179, 183, 187, 188, 196, 201, 201n48, 202, 223, 224, 233, 244, 246–248, 251, 252, 254, 260, 267, 269, 273
- Greek, 133, 135, 274
- Hebrew, 135, 165
- New Testament, 165, 179
- Old Testament, 179
- Theology
 biblical, 117, 118, 130, 136, 178

- dialectical, xi, 3, 4, 13, 13n15,
 14n17, 15n19, 15n20, 16n21,
 18, 19n31, 21n36, 21n37,
 35n5, 115–169, 171, 224, 281
 liberal, 33, 162, 168
 natural, 136, 143, 226, 276
 speculative, 2, 3, 5, 9–12, 19, 20,
 24–27, 70
- Theory**
 doctrine, 121, 232
 and praxis, 18, 20, 25n43, 27, 164,
 171, 196, 204, 233, 238
- Thurneysen, Eduard, 14, 27,
 115–169, 272
- Trinity**
 of god, 181, 255, 258, 270, 282
 unsublatable subjectivity, 186n20
- Truth, 83, 86, 87, 89, 92, 93, 93n59,
 107, 108, 128–130, 143, 157,
 160, 177, 179–181, 188, 198,
 201, 202n49, 203, 205, 207, 209,
 214, 219, 220, 222n99, 225, 228,
 234, 244, 265, 266, 271
- V**
 Value(s), 8, 33, 50, 217, 220, 227, 251
- Vocabulary, 154**
 doctrinal, 7, 8
 liberal, 8
 theological, 9
- W**
 Wittgenstein, Ludwig, 7, 7n1, 8, 8n2,
 11, 12, 12n10, 12n13, 33, 122,
 144n82, 151, 151n94, 222,
 222n99