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MODERN THEOLOGY AND THE DIALECTIC OF GOD

Introduction

In the Christian tradition, the question of whether philosophy is necessary for theology, or even relevant to it, is a question almost as old as theology itself, for no sooner had theologians embarked upon the project of a programmatic exposition of faith than they found themselves, legitimately or illegitimately, having recourse to concepts appropriated from philosophers, and from Platonists in particular. On the one hand are those unabashedly philosophical theologians like Origen, Augustine, and Aquinas, who did not hesitate to draw upon the resources of secular philosophy for the purposes of theological exposition, even if philosophy was relegated to a distinctly secondary status in regard to the authority of scripture. On the other hand are those like Tertullian, who looked upon philosophy with suspicion, often viewing it as the source of theological error on the part of those who would misinterpret the Gospel in the terms of a Hellenistic philosophy utterly alien to Gospel. "So, then," Tertullian asks, "where is there any likeness between the Christian and the philosopher? between the disciple of Greece and of heaven?" Elaborating what was to become a common trope in Christian theology, he proceeds to accuse philosophy of corrupting theology with its foreign concepts, castigating those who, "[f]inding a simple revelation of God … proceeded to dispute about Him, not as He had revealed to them, but turned aside to debate His properties, His nature, His abode. Some assert Him to be incorporeal; others maintain He has a body, — the Platonists teaching the one doctrine, and the Stoics the other … Some of their brood, with their opinions, have even adulterated our new-given Christian revelation, and corrupted it into a system of philosophic doctrines, and from the one path have struck off many and inexplicable byroads."[1] In modern philosophy, substantially the same criticism was revived by Harnack, as similar debates were rehearsed between Bultmann and Barth.[2] To me it seems axiomatic that philosophical reflection is necessary for theology, or at any rate for a philosophically *self-conscious* theology, since philosophical conceptions are logically and therefore necessarily presupposed in any theology, so that to render these conceptions explicit is to open them up to rational criticism rather than to presuppose them dogmatically. But when we turn from the

[1] Tertullian, *Apology*, trans. S. Thelwall, *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1903), vol.3, pp.51-2.

[2] See Gary Dorrien, *Kantian Reason and Hegelian Spirit: The Idealistic Logic of Modern Theology* (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2012).

first-order problematics of systematic theology itself to the second-order problem of *interpreting* theology in its historical development, the question of whether philosophical reflection is necessary for theology is obviated, for whether or not it is directly necessary for theology itself, it certainly is necessary for its *historical interpretation* just insofar as theology has, as a matter of simple empirical fact, drawn from the resources of philosophy. Whether legitimately or not, it is a fact that (at least some) theologians have done so, and if as historical interpreters we seek among other things to comprehend how these theologians understood their own work, then we have no choice but to analyze how philosophical conceptions entered into, and in many cases framed, the exposition of theological doctrine. The necessity of this analysis is heightened considerably in connection with the demands placed upon us by *modern liberal theology* in particular — the subject of this article — which was highly philosophically self-conscious, drawing heavily and explicitly upon the resources of modern philosophy in the construction of an historically novel form of theology. As Gary Dorrien has shown, modern liberal theology was deeply shaped by the tradition of German idealism, and in particular by Kant, whom he credits with having launched the "modern departure in religious thought," explaining that "[m]odern theology was born in the attempts by Schleiermacher, F.W.J. Schelling, G.W.F. Hegel and others to construe Christianity from the standpoint of a transcendental post-Kantian subject that was inconceivable without Kant."[3] For better or worse — and there *is* substantial disagreement about this — these figures laid the conceptual framework within which modern liberal theology would be elaborated and developed, so that when Barth, in the 1920s, revolted against the whole framework of liberal theology, it was, as he well understood, against *this* framework and not some other that he revolted, and to that extent not even Barthian theology, which makes a radical break from this whole tradition, can be understood apart from it.

If, therefore, we are to acquire a satisfactory understanding of the development of modern theology, we cannot avoid confrontation with this tradition of modern philosophy, and it is to this end that an analysis of the historical development of this tradition is undertaken in this article, with a view toward certain highly selective aspects, and an emphasis on Kant and Hegel in particular. Needless to say, no attempt at comprehensiveness is made here. Entire shelves can and have been written about every one of the figures considered, the significance of whom transcends the history of theology altogether. I will focus instead on a single aspect of this history which seems to me salient and rich with theological implications, arguing that in its broad outlines, the development of philosophy from classical metaphysics through Kant to Hegel can itself be read in Hegelian fashion as a dialectical one in which the implicit theme of a secularization of the divine is gradually developed and made explicit. I will also argue that this is a dialectic implicit in the logic of traditional Christian theology itself, so that the development of modern philosophy can be seen as *exemplifying* the very

[3] Dorrien, *Kantian Reason and Hegelian Spirit*, p.23.

dialectic that Hegel claims to see symbolized in the Christian doctrine of incarnation. The development of modern philosophy according to *its own logic* recapitulates the logic of secularity symbolized in the doctrine of incarnation, mirroring God's own descent from heaven to earth. But on Hegelian terms, at least as many have read him, and as I do, the dialectic of finite human thought cannot ultimately be separated from the dialectic of God's *own* self-consciousness through the finite medium of human consciousness, which in becoming conscious of the realization of the divine in human life, thereby becomes conscious of its own essentially divine nature — the consummation of a logic of secularity at once implicit in Christian doctrine, explicated in modern philosophy, and exemplified by the latter. Whether not this logic can ultimately be sustained, whether not it is ultimately tenable either philosophically or theologically, in however qualified a form, it *is*, I submit, a salient aspect of the logical development of modern philosophy and theology, and to that extent must be understood if one is to grasp what is in my view a central element of the logic of modern theology, whether this logic is ultimately to be affirmed or denied, perhaps especially in the case of the latter.

This essay, then, affirms the fundamental project of modern liberal theology, for all of its flaws, as a genuinely Christian expression. In this sense, it is a defense, at least implicitly, of the overall project of liberal theology. I do not reject the charge that liberal theology stresses God's immanence, but rather see this development as given, if only in implicit and contradictory form, in Christian doctrine itself, not least in its ancient doctrines of Incarnation and Crucifixion, and its emphasis on God's finitude — only the idea is expressed in contradictory form here (in-itself) and must be worked out theoretically into self-conscious form (for-itself), which is the task to which all theology — but of particular interest for us, modern theology — is devoted. If, in other words, liberal theology stresses God's immanence, the identity of divine and human nature, that is in large part because the Christian scriptures themselves do, and modern theology is simply working out this idea into more self-conscious form. In order to somewhat restrict the scope of our dialectical inquiry, I limit it to only one theme, the knowledge of God, and to the issues — metaphysics, epistemology, dialectics, God's relation to human beings — which are strictly related to it, and only insofar as they are strictly related to it, further restraining this inquiry to the few thinkers whose work bear directly on our topic, and deal with their work only insofar as it is strictly related to it. We thus deal almost exclusively with Kant, Schelling, and Hegel in the course of this essay, and especially with Kant and Hegel.

Here we find that Kant's "Copernican revolution" in philosophy, his turn toward the subject, from dogmatic metaphysics to epistemology, recapitulates God's movement from heaven to earth, and God's own embodiment in the form of a human subject in Christ. But Kantian idealism is predicated on a Cartesian dualism of subject and object which shows itself to be problematic in its own way, and while it represents a descent from the misty realm of dogmatic metaphysics, it is stuck with a residue of

heaven, the noumenal in-itself, which holds the divine apart from the human and prevents Kant's philosophy from assuming its life as a philosophy of *this world*. It is thus left to Hegel, following Schelling, to work out an immanent metaphysics of absolute knowing, which takes a further step from heaven toward the earth by dispensing with the noumenon, thus collapsing the distinction between the human and divine in the Absolute, from which point it is necessary to postulate human cognition, including not only Hegelian philosophy but also the whole development of modern theology, as divine cognition, as God's self-consciousness through human subjects, or the Absolute's awareness of itself as the Absolute in greater or lesser degrees of self-consciousness. Hegel's philosophy, in collapsing the distinction between thought and being, the noumenal and the phenomenal, the divine and the human, through a transcendental deduction of the Absolute, thus brings consciousness to a point where it can *recognize* its own thoughts as the *self*-consciousness of the Absolute. This in turn brings *us* to a point where, if we follow Hegel, we can interpret the whole development of modern theology, from Kant to Hegel and beyond, as God's *self*-revelation, from which it follows that the *secularization* of theology which characterizes its development is the *mode* of God's self-revelation, i.e., that the secularization which characterizes the development of modern theology does not just structurally *recapitulate* the logic of Incarnation, but rather that, on Hegelian grounds, we can see God as revealing Godself in the element of the finite, or the secular, and that, consequently, the secularization of modern theology is, on an Hegelian interpretation, the very manner in which God reveals Godself to the world. We begin with Kant.

Transcendental Idealism: Kant

To the popular understanding, the critical result of Kant's first critique (the *Critique of Pure Reason*) is often misconstrued as marking the foreclosure, consequently the end, of metaphysics as such. There is a good deal of truth in this, though if we are to be technically precise, we cannot regard it as being quite right, for even after Kant satisfies himself with the elaboration of the critical philosophy, he leaves room for metaphysics of a certain kind, in the difficult labor of which he understands himself to be undertaking in the very *Critique* in which the impossibility of metaphysics as such is commonly supposed to have been demonstrated. Kant, to his own mind, sees himself not so much as abolishing metaphysics as reformulating it, transforming it from an objectless and therefore invalid speculation which extends over a domain which exceeds the limits of possible experience to a transcendental reflection on the necessary conditions of possible experience itself, so that metaphysics, thus reformulated, can be seen as nothing other than the explication of the forms of intuition and categories of understanding which are held to make this experience possible. In this sense, the *Critique of Pure Reason* is not, and could not be, a demonstration of the impossibility of metaphysics as such, because its entire project consists in the explication of metaphysics in the reformulated sense. Still, this is a rather trivial point inasmuch as it rests on a merely semantic point concerning the definition of metaphysics, and insofar as metaphysics in the

new sense renders metaphysics in the traditional sense impossible, it is a mark of the good sense of the popular conception to recognize that the critical philosophy implies as a fundamental result the impossibility of the old speculative metaphysics, for according to Kant, our "faculty of cognition," Kant writes, "is unable to transcend the limits of possible experience; and yet this is precisely the most essential object of [metaphysics]."[4] When reason attempts to step beyond the sphere of possible experience delimited by the innate forms of intuition and categories of understanding, it "falls into confusion and contradictions, from which it conjectures the presence of latent errors, which, however, it is unable to discover, because the principles it employs, transcending the limits of experience, cannot be tested by that criterion."[5]

"The Kantian revolution," Dorrien writes, "established that experience is never merely given and that the meaning of experience is always a creative construction," namely on the part of the subject.[6] For Kant, reality is never directly given to the knowing subject. It is not immediate but mediated — by the forms of intuition and the categories of understanding. The knower does not have immediate and unmediated access to things-in-themselves (*noumena*) but only to their phenomenal appearances insofar as these latter are mediated by the forms and categories of the mind. The universal forms of intuition (sensibility), space and time, are not themselves objects of experience, or even concepts derived by abstraction *from* experience, but are rather necessary, or "transcendental" conditions for the possibility of experience as such, which for Kant are equated with conditions for the intelligibility of the representation of objects. "Space," Kant writes, "is not a conception which has been derived from outward experiences. For, in order that certain sensations may relate to something without me (that is, to something which occupies a different part of space from that in which I am); in like manner, in order that I may represent them no merely as without of an near to each other, but also in separate places, the representation of space must already exist as a foundation. Consequently, the representation of space cannot be borrowed from the relations of external phenomena through experience; but, on the contrary, this external experience is itself only possible through the said antecedent representation." Consequently, to speak of objects which exist outside of space and time is not so much wrong as it is strictly unintelligible, for "though we may easily enough think that no objects are found in [space]," we "never can imagine or make a representation to ourselves of the non-existence of space" itself.[7] The same holds, *mutatis mutandis*, for the representation of time. Thus neither space nor time are empirical conceptions derived from experience but together constitute the formal conditions a priori for the possibility of the representation of any object

[4] Immanuel Kant, Preface to *Critique of Pure Reason*, 2nd ed., trans. J.M.D. Meiklejohn (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2004), p.xxx.

[5] Kant, Preface to *Critique of Pure Reason*, p.xvii.

[6] Dorrien, *Kantian Reason and Hegelian Spirit*, p.549.

[7] Kant, *Critique of pure Reason*, p.3.

whatsoever, and insofar as they do, they are reckoned universal forms of intuition.

Now intuition arises from the capacity of the mind to be affected by objects, which Kant calls the *sensibility*, or the sensuous faculty, and regards as one of the "two main sources" from which all of our knowledge springs.[8] The other is the *understanding*, which denotes the mind's power of *conception*, or of "spontaneously producing representations." If the sensibility gives rise to *intuitions*, which furnish the mind with the content or *matter* of cognition, the understanding gives rise to *conceptions*, which constitute their (logical) *form*, both of which are absolutely essential to rational cognition, and neither of which takes any precedence over the other. As Kant famously declared: "Without the sensuous faculty [*sensibility*] no object would be given to us, and without the understanding no object would be thought. Thoughts without content are void; intuitions without conceptions, blind."[9] If the universal forms of intuition — space and time — afford necessary conditions for the appearance of any object, the understanding contains pure conceptions, which Kant follows Aristotle in calling *categories*, which correspond to the logical forms of judgement and afford necessary conditions for the representation of the synthetical unity (of intuition) under which alone an object can be cognized. These categories are divided into four classes, under each of which three categories are subsumed: (I) *Quantity*, which includes the categories of *unity*, *plurality*, and *totality*; (II) *Quality*, which includes *reality, negation,* and *limitation*; (III) *Relation*, which includes *subsistence*, *causality*, and *community*; and (IV) *Modality*, which includes the categories of *possibility, existence*, and *necessity*.[10] Just as intuition is mediated by the forms of sensibility, understanding, which unites the manifold of intuition into representations of objects, is mediated by the categories of understanding, which are, like space and time, not predicates of represented objects, but preconditions of their intelligibility.

While the detailed elaboration of these forms of intuition and categories of understanding is extraordinarily complex, the point which their introduction serves to reinforce is fundamentally simple: for Kant, objects are not directly given to knowing subjects but are instead *mediated* by the forms of sensibility and the categories of understanding. Because all knowing is mediated in this way, the subject cannot have any direct knowledge of *things-in-themselves*, which is to say, independently of their mediation by these forms and categories, and can at best have only mediated knowledge of the noumenon, i.e., *phenomenal* knowledge, or knowledge of the noumenon *insofar* as it is mediated to the subject by the forms of sensibility and categories of understanding: "What may be the nature of objects considered as things in themselves … without reference to the receptivity of our sensibility," or, we may now add, to the categories of the understanding, "is quite unknown to us. We know nothing more than

[8] Ibid., p.21.

[9] Ibid., p.22.

[10] Ibid., p.37.

our own mode of perceiving them, which is peculiar to us, and which, though not of necessity pertaining to every animated being, is so to the whole human race. With this alone we have to do."[11] Kantian idealism thus established an epistemological prohibition on any speculative metaphysics which would seek to transcend the sphere of possible experience delimited by the forms and categories of the mind. It was exactly this prohibition that so much of traditional metaphysics and theology had routinely violated, and it was exactly these kinds of metaphysical speculations to which Kant had sought to put an end. Kant's noumenal thing-in-itself acted therefore as a "brake on metaphysical speculation in philosophy and theology …"[12]

Here we must remember to bear in mind an important qualification, briefly mentioned earlier. Kant's critique did not, even to his mind, mean the end of metaphysics *as such*, only the end of traditional speculative metaphysics, as it had been done for centuries before him. "Contrary to countless renderings of Kant," Dorrien writes, "he did not renounce metaphysics in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, four-fifths of which expounded a theory of metaphysics."[13] Metaphysics would survive, but after Kant it would have to take a different, rather more modest, form. Metaphysics would live on, chastened. As Dorrien elaborates elsewhere, "Kant did not believe that metaphysics is useless … For Kant, two kinds of metaphysics were still imperative after he destroyed the old metaphysics in the *Critique of Pure Reason*: the metaphysics of nature expounded in the *a priori* principles of what is, and the metaphysics of morals expounded in the *a priori* principles of what ought to be," where religion was to take up its new abode.[14] Kant thus warns against viewing his work as being entirely *negative* with respect to metaphysics. Metaphysics as such would not be abolished, but transformed: to the extent that Kant's "criticism is occupied in confining speculative reason within its proper bounds, it is only negative; but, inasmuch as it thereby, at the same time, removes an obstacle which impedes and even threatens to destroy the use of practical reason, it possesses a positive and very important value."[15] A new space would be opened for metaphysics in the realm of practical reason, in religion and morals. As Kant famously writes, "I must, therefore, abolish *knowledge*, to make room for *belief*."[16]

Kantian idealism involved a revolution in our conception not only of the limits of knowledge, but also of the *locus philosophicus*, the whole proper subject matter of philosophy. It did not only imply the limits to the questions philosophers asked, but also to the *kinds* of questions which they asked. After Kant, the old problems of metaphysics would increasingly be treated critically as problems of epistemology, which had displaced the

[11] Ibid., p.13.

[12] Dorrien, *Kantian Reason and Hegelian Spirit*, p.47.

[13] Ibid., p.531.

[14] Ibid. p.48.

[15] Kant, Preface to *Critique of Pure Reason*, 2nd ed., p.xxxii.

[16] Ibid., p.xxxiv.

former as first philosophy. The focus of philosophy would not be about knowable objects but knowing subjects. Kant compared his own revolution in philosophy to the efforts of Copernicus in the natural sciences, in which Kant himself was steeped and to which he had made significant contributions himself. "We here propose to do just what Copernicus did in attempting to explain the celestial movements," Kant writes: "When he found that he could make no progress by assuming that all the heavenly bodies revolved around the spectator, he reversed the process, and tried the experiment of assuming that the spectator revolved, while the stars were at rest."[17] In Kant's analogy, the knowing subject was like the celestial spectator, the heavenly bodies, the objects of his thought. If in the course of philosophical history, we have not made progress by proceeding from the object, Kant reasoned, perhaps we would do better by reversing the process and proceeding from the philosophical spectator, the knowing subject: "It has hitherto been assumed," Kant writes, "that our cognition must conform to the objects; but all attempts to ascertain anything about these objects a priori, by means of conceptions, and thus to extend the range of our knowledge, have been rendered abortive by this assumption. Let us then make the experiment whether we may not be more successful in metaphysics, if we assume that the objects must conform to our cognition."[18] One of Kant's most valuable contributions to philosophy from a theoretical point of view was to have shown that the subject is always already implicated in the act of knowing an object, and that an account of the knowledge of an object is inadequate with respect to its own aims without an account of the knowing subject and the manner in which the subject knows its object. "The historic significance of the *Critique of Pure Reason* … lay in its transcendental argument that the mind is active in producing experience out of its *a priori* categories. The mind is not passive in taking in whatever is out there … "[19]

Kant's Copernican revolution in philosophy, his *turn toward the subject*, recapitulated in a vital way the logic of Incarnation. Just as God had descended from heaven to earth, so philosophy, in conceiving God, would have to follow suit, descending from misty realms of metaphysics to the human realm of the knower's subjectivity. Kant's turn from a speculative consideration of metaphysical objects, including God, toward the human subject, recapitulated God's own embodiment in human flesh. Just as God stripped Godself of metaphysical form, assuming instead a human one, so philosophy with Kant would strip itself of its metaphysical preoccupation and pretension and assume its own, rather more worldly questions about the knowing subject. Kant's historic move from metaphysics to epistemology was the first major theoretical development in the general movement of modern philosophy and liberal theology down from heaven

[17] Ibid., p.xxix.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Dorrien, *Kantian Spirit and Hegelian Reason*, p.56.

and into earth, the secularization of reason, corresponding to the secularization of philosophy itself.[20]

Kant's *turn toward the subject* corresponded to a change in the kinds of questions which it was proper to philosophy to be asking, and the disappearance of others. With his Copernican shift, Kant "redefines metaphysical problems as problems of epistemology," Andrew Fiala writes. "Kant transforms questions about the existence of God, about the freedom of the will, and about the nature of time into questions about knowledge."[21]

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[20] In what was perhaps the instituting act of liberal theology of which it was constitutive, Kant's turn toward the subject corresponded to the elevation of reason as an authoritative source of knowledge in the sphere of religion, for which scripture and church tradition had for so long held the coveted throne. For traditional theology (as for Barth, incidentally), the truth was not in the subject of knowing, but in the object of knowing, God, revealed in scripture, interpreted by the church. The authority of scripture and tradition therefore naturally corresponded to the structure of traditional theological metaphysics, the basis of which changed radically when Kant challenged the whole structure of metaphysical reason. If an adequate account of reality begins, as Kant reasoned, with epistemology rather than metaphysics, with the subject rather than the object, then the methodologically appropriate manner of describing reality is not the mediation of objective truth by scripture through the church but rather through the exercise of subject's own reason. It is no accident that Kant's philosophy included a philosophical turn toward the subject corresponding to a methodological elevation of individual reason, a view he expressed most forcefully, and not without a hint of presumption, in "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?" "Enlightenment," he writes, "is man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity," which is nothing other than "the inability to use one's own understanding without the guidance of another." "Laziness and cowardice," Kant goes on, "are the reasons why such a large proportion of men … gladly remain immature for life." But although it is "so convenient to be immature" and "difficult for each separate individual to work his way out of" this immaturity, it is imperative for each to follow the motto of Enlightenment: "Have the courage to use your own understanding!" (Immanuel Kant, "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment," in *Kant: Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss, trans. H.B. Nisbet, 2nd ed., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, p.54). Although, in Kant's view, one is morally obliged to restrict one's private use of reason — the expression of reason within a given institution — one is at the same time obligated to make fullest public use of reason, especially in "matters of religion," which Kant has made the "focal point of enlightenment" because "religious immaturity is the most pernicious and dishonourable variety of all" (Ibid., p.59). Therefore, "a clergyman is bound to instruct his pupils and his congregation in accordance with the doctrines of the church he serves, for he was employed by it on that condition. But as a scholar, he is completely free as well as obliged to impart to the public all his carefully considered, well-intentioned thoughts on the mistaken aspects of those doctrines, and to offer suggestions for a better arrangement of religious and ecclesiastical affairs," even if these thoughts "deviate here and there from orthodox doctrine." Beyond this, Kant proscribes the formulation of an "unalterable set of doctrines" on the part of religious institutions, which amounts to a "crime against human nature, whose original destiny lies precisely in … progress," "violating and trampling underfoot the sacred rights of mankind" (Ibid., pp.56-9). Kant's turn toward the subject thus corresponded to the elevation of reason as an authoritative source of knowledge, which was in many respects the defining characteristic of modern liberal theology. "Modern theology began," Dorrien tells us, "when theologians looked beyond the Bible and Christian tradition for answers to their questions …" It is "the idea that all claims to truth, in theology and other disciplines, must be made on the basis of reason and experience, not by appeal to external authority" (Dorrien, *Kantian Reason and Hegelian Spirit*, pp.3-4).

[21] Andrew Fiala, Introduction to Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 2nd ed., p.ix.

Kant redefines the problems of metaphysics as problems of epistemology — just as philosophers in the analytic tradition would later attempt to redefine some of these same problems as problems of language and logic. It was not so much a solution or resolution of the problems of metaphysics as it was a *dissolution*. In his own way, Kant showed long before Wittgenstein did that the solution to the problems of philosophy were to be found in the disappearance of the questions — that often the way around philosophical problems was not to solve them, but to dissolve them, changing the questions which engendered those false problems in the first place, rendering the old problems objectless. Kant *changed the subject* of philosophy, from speculative metaphysics to epistemology, the latter of which is always necessarily presupposed in the former.

But in a twist of irony, and a dialectical inversion, metaphysics would come back to haunt Kant. Just as metaphysics for Kant always already presupposed some kind of epistemology, so later post-Kantians like Schelling and Hegel would argue that epistemology always already presupposes some kind of metaphysics, inverting the whole Kantian order of things. Kantian idealism, they argued, was fundamentally predicated on a *metaphysical* dualism of subject and object, of thought and being, of knowable phenomenon and unknowable noumenon — along with a whole host of metaphysical presuppositions which Kant had assumed rather than argued.

Absolute Idealism: Schelling and Hegel

For Kant, the noumenon was a regulative concept which functioned to establish what cannot be known. It was formulated on the basis of a basic Cartesian dualism between what is given *in* self-consciousness and what is given *to* self-consciousness. In a sense, Kant was meticulously working out the philosophical problems earlier formulated by Descartes, but could only do so on the basis of Descartes' metaphysical assumptions. On the basis of a Cartesian dualism of thought and being, or of subject and object, the noumenon was, from Kant's point of view, a necessary philosophical presupposition. But this was only so *on the basis of a metaphysical dualism of thought and being*, and it was precisely this basis which the post-Kantians like Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel would call radically into question. Schelling protested that Kant's noumenon was so separate from the phenomenon, his subject so removed from its object, that no relation could be established between them. As Beiser writes, "Kantians cannot bridge the gulf between these realms, because they make so sharp a distinction between the form and the matter of experience that they cannot explain how their interaction occurs."[22] Schelling protested that the concept of a noumenon, "being excluded from space and time, floats between something and nothing," lacking even "the virtue of being absolutely

[22] Frederick Beiser, *Hegel* (London: Routledge, 2005), p.106.

nothing."[23] "The postulated things in themselves do not cause representations in us," Dorrien writes, "so what good are they?"[24] Beyond being functionally useless, the noumenon posited by Kantian idealism prevents the possibility of real knowledge. Kant "left philosophy with a knowing subject that knows nothing besides the products of its activity. Since the Kantian subject could not know objects in themselves, it was stuck in the very dilemma that Jacobi warned about: Either it knew itself or it knew nothing."[25] For Schelling as for the other post-Kantian idealists, the only way around this problem that could account for the possibility of knowledge was to posit a subject-object identity — the core foundation of Absolute idealism. Finding the concept of a noumenal thing-in-itself useless at best and obstructive at worst, Schelling discarded it and argued that a fundamental identity between subject and object, grasped by immediate intuition, was a necessary condition of any knowledge.

Hegel took up Schelling's Absolute Idealism but modified it in doing so. Like Schelling, he had his own misgivings about the thing-in-itself. Hegel questioned the basis upon which a noumenon, being *per definitionem* unknowable, could in the first place be posited. The Kantian noumenon is supposed to be the criterion of truth by which the accuracy of the phenomenon's correspondence to the noumenon is judged, but it is precisely at this point that the noumenon, by virtue of its *ipso facto* unknowability and unintelligibility, fails to account for anything. As Hegel writes in the Introduction to his *Phenomenology*, the philosophical standpoint represented by Kantian idealism "takes for granted certain ideas about cognition as an *instrument* and as a *medium*, and assumes that there is a *difference between ourselves and this cognition,*" but the problem is that, even then, "consciousness cannot, as it were, get behind the object as it exists for consciousness so as to examine what the object is *in itself*, and hence, too, cannot test its own knowledge by that standard."[26] Kant's noumenon is supposed to be a regulative concept whose specific theoretical value consists in its function, but it functions least exactly where it is supposed to function most. How is Kant justified in positing the existence of the noumenon if it is, by definition, unknowable? How can the veracity of the knowable phenomenon be judged against an unknowable standard? As Findlay notes, "Hegel's criticism of [the Kantian] view of knowledge is simply that it is self-refuting, that it pronounces, even if negatively, on the relation of conscious appearances to absolute reality, while claiming that the latter must for ever transcend knowledge."[27] As a regulative concept, the noumenon is supposed to *relate negatively* to the phenomenon,

[23] "Being excluded": Dorrien's characterization of Schelling's position; "the virtue of": Schelling quoted. Both quotations from Dorrien, *Kantian Reason and Hegelian Spirit*, p.170.

[24] Ibid., p.171.

[25] Ibid., p.538.

[26] G.W.F. Hegel, Introduction to *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp.47,54.

[27] J.N. Findlay, Foreword to Hegel, *Phenomenology*, p.xiv.

prescribing the bounds of its knowability to the subject — but if the noumenon itself is unknowable, it cannot have *any relation* to the phenomenon at all, not even a negative one, since, epistemologically speaking, there are no grounds upon which to posit such a relation in the first place. The intelligibility of the phenomenon cannot be measured against an unintelligible standard, and so it cannot be measured, on the basis of Kant's model, against anything at all.

Finding the noumenon useless, Hegel, like Schelling, dispenses with it altogether, and agrees that subject-object identity has to be posited in order to explain the possibility of knowledge. But he is unconvinced by Schelling's appeal to intuition, and despite having flirted with an intuitionism of his own in his earlier years, Hegel later gives up on it as an ultimately dogmatic method. Kant may have predicated his epistemology on the basis of a faulty metaphysical dualism, but he at least provided an argument. Although Hegel agreed with Schelling that true philosophy begins with the identity of thought and being, he did not think one could simply proceed from it pure and simple. One had to demonstrate its logical necessity by means of a dialectic of consciousness which derives subject-object identity as a transcendental condition of experience itself — to which task he devoted his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which amounted to Hegel's argument for Absolute idealism. Against Schelling, Hegel asserted that the logical necessity of the Absolute had to be demonstrated, for which task he found an appropriate method in Fichte's dialectical method. In the *Phenomenology*, Hegel combined Spinoza's substance monism with Schelling's Absolute idealism and Fichte's self-positing Ego to bring what he thought of as Kant's truncated philosophical project into completion. One cannot simply "palm off" the metaphysical dualism upon which Kant's epistemology is predicated, but has to show, dialectically, the manner in which it develops, by virtue of its own contradictions, into the standpoint of Absolute idealism. One has to show how Kant's metaphysical dualism itself presupposes and is only completed by Absolute idealism. In the *Phenomenology*, Hegel laboriously works out the manner in which the various shapes of consciousness give way by the weight of their own contradictions into new forms of consciousness which are always presupposed in the former shape. Here it is not necessary to summarize his entire argument, but to describe the manner in which it relates to Kant in particular. What we must investigate is not so much the general argument of the *Phenomenology*, as the specific point in the course of the *Phenomenology* at which Hegel moves beyond Kantian idealism, and the specific manner in which he does this.

Kantian idealism for Hegel represents the "shape" of Spirit corresponding to what he calls "Understanding," which, to Hegel's mind, Kant does not get beyond, and in which he ultimately remains stuck. Here we should be clear that Hegel did not reject Kant's contribution to philosophy, even if it remained at the level of Understanding. Because the Understanding represented a higher and more developed form of Spirit than both Sense-Certainty and Perception, Hegel saw Understanding as a necessary part of

the development of Spirit, and credited Kant on this account, appreciating and to a large extent affirming Kant's criticism of traditional speculative metaphysics. For Hegel, "It was one of Kant's great merits," Beiser tells us, "to have subjected the old metaphysics to criticism. He agreed entirely with Kant that one of the chief failures of past metaphysics was its *dogmatism*, i.e., its failure to investigate the powers and limits of reason." As a result, "Hegel fully endorsed the demands of Kantian criticism, insisting that 'any future metaphysics that comes forward as a science alone' would first have to pass the test of criticism."[28] Hegel for his part therefore appreciated Kant's criticism of the "old metaphysics" as a necessary development in Spirit; the problem from Hegel's point of view was simply that Kant never got past this rather limited point of view, corresponding to the Understanding.

The problem of the Understanding which Kantian idealism represented was, as we have already seen, that it was self-defeating, and negated, on its own terms, the possibility of knowledge. The metaphysical dualism of Kantian idealism made it all but impossible to account for the possibility of knowledge through the interaction of subject and object. "The possibility of knowledge required some correspondence between the realms of the intellectual and the empirical, the subject and the objective; but Kant had postulated such a sharp dualism between these realms that any correspondence between them became unintelligible." From this point of view, absolute idealism, a metaphysical identity of subject and object, *not* metaphysical dualism of the Kantian sort, was the necessary precondition of knowledge. Hegel therefore considered "his metaphysics not only as a *possibility* but as a *necessity* of the critical philosophy itself."[29]

From Hegel's point of view, Kant's failures were ultimately methodological. Kant did not get past Understanding because he hypostatized its laws and extended them to Reason. The underlying reason for this mistake on Kant's part was his methodological *formalism*. Hegel complained that "the method of Kantian criticism is *external*, presupposing the truth of some standard of criticism that does not derive from the concepts themselves. Against Kant, Hegel insisted that the criticism of knowledge must be *internal*, so that the subject matter is evaluated according to its own inherent standards and goals."[30] To apply external principles to consciousness the way that Hegel supposed Kant did is to ignore the movement of consciousness which is derived from its own inner necessity, and to pigeonhole Spirit in a lifeless formalism. As Hegel writes, "What results from this method of labelling all that is in heaven and earth with the few determinations of the general schema, and pigeonholing everything in this way, is nothing less than a 'report clear as noonday' on the universe as an organism, viz. a synoptic table like a skeleton with scraps of paper stuck all over it, or like the rows of closed and labelled boxes in a

[28] Beiser, *Hegel*, p.156.

[29] Ibid., p.158.

[30] Ibid., p.157.

grocer's stall."[31] Contrasting his own dialectical method to Kant's formalism, he goes on to elaborate: "Instead of entering into the immanent content of the thing, [the formal Understanding] is forever surveying the whole and standing above the particular existence of which it is speaking, i.e. it does not see it at all. Scientific cognition, on the contrary, demands surrender to the life of the object, or, what amounts to the same thing, confronting and expressing its inner necessity."[32]

In place of Kant's methodological formalism, which applied an a priori standard of truth to its object, proceeding from rather than arriving at a method, Hegel applied a *dialectical method*, according to which the "standards, rules, and guidelines appropriate to a subject matter should be the result, not the starting point, of the investigation."[33] Unlike methodological formalism, dialectical criticism grasps the inner forms of Spirit as they appear to consciousness.[34] It sinks itself in the content, "letting it move spontaneously of its own nature, by the self as its own self, and then [contemplates] this movement."[35] As Hegel writes, "not only is a contribution by 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."[36] At best, the philosopher can refute consciousness by pointing out the manner in which it is inconsistent with itself. The refutation of consciousness "is derived and developed from the principle itself, not accomplished by counter-assertions and random thought from outside. The refutation would, therefore, properly consist in the further development of the principle …"[37]

In criticizing Kant's methodological formalism, Hegel had committed himself to a dialectical procedure, which required him to show how Absolute idealism is derived and developed from Kantian (transcendental) idealism itself. He has to show the manner in which the standpoint of Reason properly develops out of the standpoint of Understanding itself. In the dialectic of the Understanding, then, Hegel shows how the standpoint of Understanding, represented by Kantian idealism, gives rise to its own internal contradictions: both separating and uniting subject and object: "The dialectic arises from an inevitable contradiction in the procedures of the

[31] Hegel, Preface to *Phenomenology*, p.31.

[32] Beiser, *Hegel*, p.32.

[33] Ibid., p.160.

[34] As Beiser stresses, "The dialectic if what follows from the concept of the thing. It is flatly contradictory to Hegel's intention, therefore, to assume that the dialectic is an a priori methodology, or indeed a kind of logic, that one can apply to any subject matter. The dialectic is the very opposite: it is the inner movement of the subject matter, what evolves from it rather than what the philosopher applies to it" (Ibid.).

[35] Hegel, Preface to *Phenomenology*, p.36.

[36] Ibid., p.54.

[37] Ibid., p.13.

understanding. The understanding contradicts itself because it both *separates* things, as if they were completely independent of one another, and *connects* them, as if neither could exist apart from the other. It separates things when it analyzes them into their parts, each of which is given a self-sufficient status; and it connects them according to the principle of sufficient reason, showing how each event has a cause, or how each part inheres in a still smaller part, and so on *ad infinitum*."[38] In the case of Kantian idealism, the contradiction between separation and unity becomes especially apparent in the ambiguity with which subject and object are related. The ambiguity is aptly noted by Beiser, who suggests that the challenge facing Kantian idealism "is that there must be *and* cannot be such an identity of identity and non-identity" of subject and object. "According to idealist principles, there *must be* such an identity because subject-object identity is the first principle of *all* knowledge, even the awareness of an apparently distinct object in experience; but there also *cannot be* such an identity because the principle of subject-object identity contradicts the subject-object dualism of experience."[39] As we have already observed, Kantian idealism on the one hand presupposes subject-object identity as a necessary condition of possible experience. On the other hand, it posits an unbridgeable metaphysical gap between subject and object. The relation between subject and object, between thought and being, phenomenal and noumenal realms, is therefore in a rather ambiguous and indeterminate situation. Knowledge is caught in a kind of awkward limbo somewhere in between the phenomenal realm's dependence on the noumenal realm, and its independence, its total separation, from it. "The only way to resolve the contradiction," Beiser writes, "is to reinterpret the independent or self-sufficient term as the whole of which all connected or dependent terms are only parts. The mistake of the understanding arose in giving self-sufficient status to a part of the whole; it rectifies its error and resolves its contradiction when it ascends to the standpoint of the whole itself," which is, in the final analysis, nothing other than the standpoint of absolute idealism itself.

Beiser is thus right to regard the dialectic presented in the *Phenomenology* as a "transcendental deduction of metaphysics." As he writes, "just as Kant argues in the Transcendental Deduction of the first *Critique* that the categories are a necessary condition of possible experience, so Hegel contends in the *Phenomenology* that the ideas of metaphysics are a necessary condition of actual experience."[40] Kant's and Hegel's transcendental deductions both correspond to definite developments of Spirit. Kant's transcendental deduction showed the Understanding to be the necessary condition of Perception, and Hegel's, moving beyond this, showed Reason to be the necessary condition of the Understanding. The Absolute, or the identity of subject and object, is presupposed in the same way that any higher form of consciousness is presupposed in any lower form of

[38] Beiser, *Hegel*, p.164.

[39] Beiser, *Hegel*, p.180.

[40] Ibid., p.170.

consciousness. Absolute knowing is presupposed in the act of knowing just as Understanding is presupposed in Sense-Certainty, or Self-Consciousness is presupposed in Consciousness. In this dialectic the higher forms of consciousness do not eliminate or even replace the lower forms of consciousness so much as they complete them, are necessarily presupposed by them. For Hegel it is not as if we are for instance self-conscious *rather* than or *instead of* simply conscious, but rather that even being conscious always already *implies* some degree of self-consciousness, that self-consciousness is implied in every simple consciousness. In a similar way, the Absolute, the identity of subject and object, of thought and being, is always implied in the form of Understanding which Kantian idealism represents. The crucial point we must bear in mind here is that "the ascent to the whole comes from *within the understanding itself*," (my emphasis)[41] and is not derived from without. Adhering to his own dialectical premises, Hegel does not exogenously impose the principle of Reason, which grasps objects as parts of larger wholes, but develops it out of the principle of the Understanding itself. He shows the manner in which the contradictions of Understanding are self-generated, and self-resolved.

In one sense, Hegel simply dispenses with the noumenal realm. But it might be more appropriate at this point to say that he doesn't so much eliminate either the noumenal or phenomenal realm as he synthesizes them, showing them both to be part of an indivisible whole. "Hegel saw that Kant's dualism [was] part of the problem rather than the solution. The proper solution is not to divide but to unite the noumenal and the phenomenal, unconditioned and conditions, by showing how both form necessary parts of a single indivisible whole."[42] Having dispensed with the noumenal realm as something distinct from phenomenal reality, Hegel has to account for the manner in which experience shows that phenomenal appearances are distinct from noumenal objects. Kant's relation between the noumenon and the phenomenon represented a certain kind of relation in which reality was metaphysically distinct from its appearances. Having dispensed with the noumenal realm as a distinct sphere from the phenomenal realm, Hegel has to account for the difference between reality and appearance *within* the phenomenal realm. The phenomenology of spirit "has only phenomenal knowledge for its object," Hegel writes. "Since our object is phenomenal knowledge … if we inquire into the truth of knowledge, it seems that we are asking what knowledge is *in itself*. Yet in this inquiry knowledge is *our* object, something that exists *for us*."[43] The distinction between appearance and reality is preserved, but the noumenon, the unknowable whose very structure did not permit knowledge, has been dispensed with. To Kantian idealism, Findlay writes, "Hegel opposes the view that the distinction between what things in themselves are, and what things only are for consciousness or knowledge, must itself be a distinction drawn within consciousness, that the former can be only the corrected view

[41] Ibid., p.164.

[42] Ibid., p.166-7.

[43] Hegel, Introduction to *Phenomenology*, pp.49,53.

of an object, while the latter is merely a view formerly entertained but now abandoned as incorrect. The progress of knowledge will then consist in the constant demotion of what appeared to be the absolute truth about the object to what now appears to be only the way that the object appeared to consciousness, a new appearance of absolute truth taking the former's place."[44]

In a sense, Hegel, in order to work out an epistemological model without appeal to the noumenal, *flattens* out Kant's vertical epistemological dualism into a horizontal dialectics which finds its consummation in absolute idealism. He replaces Kant's vertical phenomenon-noumenon relation into a horizontal Notion-object relation: "If we designate *knowledge* as the Notion, but the essence or the *True* as what exists, or the *object*," as Kant had done, "then the examination consists in seeing whether the Notion corresponds to the object. But if we call the *essence* or in-itself of the *object* the *Notion*, and on the other hand understand by the *object* the Notion itself as *object*, viz., as it exists *for an other*, then the examination consists in seeing whether the object corresponds to its notion."[45] Kant designated the noumenal in-itself as the object and the phenomenal knowledge of it as the Notion of this object, but Hegel, having dispensed with the noumenal, sees what Kant had formerly designated as the object-in-itself as the phenomenal *Notion*, and what Kant had formerly designated as the Notion as the object, the object *for an other*. In Hegel's system, both the Notion and the Object correspond to what Kant would have designated as phenomenal entities in his system, but they are distinguished now by their correlative status, the object, playing a role functionally similar to Kant's phenomenal Notion, being an object *for another*, the Notion, playing a role functionally similar to Kant's noumenal object, being an object *in-itself*. All of these relations, Hegel hastens to emphasize, refer to what Kant would have designated as phenomena. The "essential point to bear in mind throughout the whole investigation," Hegel cautions, "is that these two moments, 'Notion' and 'object,' 'being-for-another' and 'being-in-itself,' both fall *within* that knowledge which we are investigating," which Hegel explicitly designates as "phenomenal knowledge" two paragraphs prior.[46] Kant's distinction between reality and appearance, then, is preserved but transformed, and the point for consciousness is to see whether, within the realm of phenomenal knowledge, object corresponds to its Notion. Philosophical criticism explicates the implicit presuppositions of consciousness in its own self-doubt, which, Hegel writes, "is the conscious insight into the untruth of phenomenal knowledge, for which the supreme reality is what is in truth only the unrealized Notion."[47] It is in this way that Hegel *flattens* Kant's metaphysically dualistic relation between phenomenon and noumenon into a dialectical relation between object and its Notion. Where Kant had postulated external standards of knowledge for

[44] Findlay, Foreword to Hegel, *Phenomenology*, p.xiv.

[45] Hegel, Introduction to *Phenomenology*, p.53.

[46] Ibid.

[47] Ibid., p.50.

consciousness to compare reality and existence, Hegel explicates the implicit standards internal to consciousness itself: "Consciousness provides its own criterion from within itself, so that the investigation becomes a comparison of consciousness with itself; for the distinction" between object and its Notion "falls within it."[48] (As we have already seen, it was Kant's failure to recognize this that prevented him, from Hegel's point of view, from moving beyond Understanding). As Hegel goes on to elaborate, "consciousness is, on the one hand, consciousness of the object, and on the other, consciousness of itself; consciousness of what for it is the True, and consciousness of its knowledge of the truth … the distinction between the in-itself and knowledge is already present in the very fact that consciousness knows an object at all. Something is *for it* the *in-itself*; and knowledge, or the being of the object for consciousness, is, *for it*, another moment."[49] What consciousness takes to be true, the object-for-consciousness, turns out not to correspond to the object-in-itself, and consciousness assumes the point of view of the latter, which then becomes another object-for-consciousness, and it in turns out not to correspond to the object-in-itself, or its own Notion, and so on. "Hence it comes to pass for consciousness that what it previously took to be the *in-itself* is not an *in-itself*, or that it was only an in-itself *for consciousness*."[50] As Hegel puts it somewhat more eloquently elsewhere, "The bud disappears in the bursting-forth of the blossom, and one might say that the former is refuted by the latter; similarly, when the fruit appears, the blossom is shown up in its turn as a false manifestation of the plant, and the fruit now emerges as the truth of it instead."[51] But here it is absolutely crucial to recognize that the negation of an earlier moment of consciousness is developed out of the logical necessity (i.e., the concept) of the object itself. Therefore, as Hegel insists, "in every case the result of an untrue mode of knowledge must not be allowed to run away into an empty nothing, but must necessarily be grasped as the nothing [i.e., the negation] *of that from which it results* — a result which contains what is true in the preceding knowledge," not least because, as we have already seen, consciousness develops out of self-criticism according to principles derived *from itself*, such that every subsequent moment or shape of consciousness is a logical development of an earlier one.[52] Hegel's organic metaphor of the bud, blossom, plant, and fruit is apt: each is the negation of the former, but also the organic development of it, the *truth* of it.

Consciousness thus assumes a *dynamic* aspect as its own self-interrogation leads it from one "moment," in which a given object is taken to be the in-itself, to another, in which another given object is taken to be the in-itself, and so on. Thus, Hegel says, "Truth is its own self-movement."[53] In order to

[48] Ibid., p.53.
[49] Ibid., p.54.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Hegel, Preface to *Phenomenology*, p.2.
[52] Hegel, Introduction to *Phenomenology*, p.56.
[53] Hegel, Preface to *Phenomenology*, p.28.

describe the general nature of this movement (which Hegel can only do *a posteriori*, because consciousness criticizes itself according to its own principles and the role of the philosopher is to observe this), Hegel reconfigures Fichte's self-positing Ego. "The movement of a being that immediately is," Hegel writes, "consists partly in becoming an other than itself, and thus becoming its own immanent content; partly in taking back into itself this unfolding [of its content] of this existence of it."[54] One moment of consciousness is at first seen by consciousness to be in a wholly negative relation to another moment, and is posted therefore as its *negation,* or its *other*. But because the subsequent moment, which is at first seen as the *other* to consciousness, is nothing other than the logical development of the previous moment of consciousness, according to its own principles, because the *other* is nothing but the negation "*of that from which it results* — a result which contains what was true in the preceding knowledge," what was taken to be the *other* to consciousness in fact turns out to be consciousness itself in a more developed form, a more developed consciousness which is simply not aware of itself as this higher form. The various moments or shapes of consciousness, then, represents the Notion in greater or lesser degrees of *self*-consciousness, i.e., the Notion which is conscious of itself as the Notion of itself. Here it may be helpful to recall Hegel's suggestion that the "supreme reality" of phenomenal knowledge is "in truth only the unrealized Notion." And if the various intermediate phases of consciousness represent only *partial* self-consciousness on the part of the Notion, then the Notion which is *fully* self-conscious of itself as the Notion is the Absolute, to which argument Hegel devotes his *Phenomenology.* The various phases of consciousness which Hegel traces in the course of the *Phenomenology* (Sense-Certainty, Perception, Understanding, Reason, Self-Consciousness, etc.), then, represent different degrees of the self-consciousness of the Absolute, different levels of awareness of the Absolute of itself as the Absolute. "The series of configurations which consciousness goes through along this road is, in reality, the detailed history of the *education* of consciousness itself to the standpoint of Science," which is itself nothing other than Spirit (consciousness) which "knows itself as Spirit," knowledge of the Absolute, which is in fact nothing other than the full self-consciousness of the Absolute of itself as the Absolute.[55] Unlike Schelling, Hegel felt that the Absolute needed to be demonstrated; it is not the starting point of philosophy, but its result: "It is only *after* his investigation that the philosopher understands that his object has been all along the absolute …"[56]

It is one thing to demonstrate the validity of Absolute idealism through a transcendental deduction of the sort that Hegel achieved. It is another thing altogether to grasp its meaning. Hegel may have shown through the argument of the *Phenomenology* that the Absolute is implied in any act of knowing, however simple, that each of the various stages of consciousness

[54] Ibid., p.32.

[55] Hegel, Introduction to *Phenomenology*, p.50; Preface to *Phenomenology*, p.14.

[56] Beiser, *Hegel*, p.60.

represent greater or lesser degrees of self-consciousness on the part of the Absolute of itself as the Absolute, but what it *means* for the Absolute to be implied in every act of knowing, or what it means for the identity of subject and object to be a necessary condition for the possibility of experience, or what it means for knowledge on the part of the subject to be nothing other than the self-knowledge of the Absolute — all of this remains to be answered. The problems are particularly difficult for modern interpreters because they seem to point to a kind of quasi-animistic conception of the Absolute as something with a kind of conscious will and intention of its own — in short, because they interpret the Absolute in narrowly subjective terms. As Dorrien explains, Absolute idealism "is not about the self-knowledge of a finite subject. It is about the self-knowledge of the absolute within a finite subject. Instead of trapping subject-object identity inside the circle of its own representations, Schelling and Hegel lifted subject-identity outside this circle by equating the self-knowledge of a knowing subject with the self-knowledge of the absolute … My knowledge is not merely something that I know from my own consciousness. It is knowledge of the absolute through the object itself."[57] But the Absolute, however, is not some kind mystical *being* with a will and consciousness of its own, at least not any will or consciousness apart from the finite subjects in which it realizes itself. For Hegel, to assert the identity of thought and being, is, following Schelling, to see both thought and being as different attributes of the same substance, but sharing the same essential structure. Following after Spinoza and Schelling, Hegel's Absolute idealism posited that "the subjective and the objective, the intellectual and the empirical, the ideal and the real — however one formulates the opposition — are not distinct substances but simply different aspects, properties or attributes of one and the same substance" — the Absolute which includes the identity of subject and object.[58]

Schelling and Hegel deduced the identity of subject and object as a necessary condition of possible experience. Following Fichte, they understood that there was only one possibility which could meet this condition, viz., *self*-consciousness, since it is only in self-consciousness that the knowing subject and the known object are one and the same, with the Absolute as the subject of subject-object identity, as the self of this *self*-consciousness.[59] On this basis, the assertion that knowledge is the self-consciousness of the Absolute is to say that thought and being, subject and object, being merely different attributes of the same substance, share the same fundamental structure: thought inheres in matter. The Absolute is itself "neither subjective nor objective because it is the form or structure that inheres equally in both."[60] To suggest that thought inheres in or is immanent in matter is not to suggest a kind of quasi-animism or spirit

[57] Dorrien, *Kantian Reason and Hegelian Spirit*, p.538.

[58] Beiser, *Hegel*, p.64; Beiser, "Hegel and the Problem of Metaphysics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hegel*, ed. Beiser, (Cambridge University Press, 1993), p.6.

[59] Beiser, "Hegel and the Problem of Metaphysics," p.12.

[60] Beiser, *Hegel*, p.69.

monism. Hegel's monism is closer to Aristotelian than Platonic idealism: the thought that inheres in matter governs it by a logical necessity inherent in the structure of matter itself, presupposing no self-conscious agent: "The purpose that governs the world is only its inherent form or structure," Beiser writes, "and it does not necessarily imply the intention of some agent."[61] As Hegel himself clarifies, drawing on an ancient saying to which he often takes recourse: "The signification thus attached to thought and its characteristic forms may be illustrated by the ancient saying that '*nous* governs the world,' or by our own phrase that 'Reason is in the world': which means that Reason is the soul of the world it inhabits, its immanent principle, its most proper and inward nature, its universal."[62]

The metaphysical and theological implications of Hegel's absolute idealism were immense. For Hegel, the Absolute meant nothing other than, and was synonymous with, *God*. From his point of view, philosophy shared the same subject matter with theology — "God and God alone."[63] Hegel felt that the goal of philosophy was nothing short of cognizing God, explaining that "the content of philosophy, its need and interest, is wholly in common with that of religion. The object of religion, like that of philosophy, is eternal truth, God and nothing but God and the explication of God. Philosophy is only explicating *itself* when it explicates religion, and when it explicates itself it is explicating religion … Thus religion and philosophy coincide in one. In fact philosophy is itself the service of God."[64] The metaphysical dualism upon which Kantian idealism was predicated proscribed any real knowledge of God, the latter, on these terms, falling beyond the realm of possible experience, and Kant was forced to posit God as a necessary postulate of practical reason, a necessary precondition of moral freedom.[65] Hegel was dissatisfied with this solution, quipping that Kantian idealism turned God into a mere "phantom, far removed from our consciousness."[66] This necessarily followed from the dualistic metaphysics of Kantian idealism. The theological implications of Hegel's immanent metaphysics, his flattening of Kant's metaphysical dualism into the Absolute, are not difficult to infer. It meant among other things that the life of God is realized in the phenomenal world, not in some transcendent sphere beyond and opposed to it, as traditional theology, and even to some

[61] Ibid., p.68; see also Paul Redding, "Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Zalta, 22 July 2010, accessed 02 May 2015, http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hegel.

[62] G.W.F. Hegel, *Logic* (*Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*), trans. William Wallace (London: Oxford University Press, 1892), p.46.

[63] On this point, Hegel was explicit, and insistent: "In his *Encyclopedia* he declares that the subject matter of philosophy is God and God alone. And in his lectures on the philosophy of religion he arrism that philosophy and religion share one and the same object: the absolute or God" (Beiser, *Hegel*, p.54).

[64] G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, one-volume edition, ed. Peter C. Hodgson, trans. R.F. Brown, P.C. Hodgson, and J.M. Stewart with the assistance of H.S. Harris (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp.78-9.

[65] See Dorrien, *Kantian Reason and Hegelian Spirit*, pp.48-9.

[66] Hegel, qtd. in Dorrien, *Kantian Reason and Hegelian Spirit*, p.211.

extent Kant, had maintained. Although Kant shut the lid on traditional speculative metaphysics, of which God was the principal subject, he himself retained a concept of God which was not altogether dissimilar; it only differed in the manner in which it was *posited* — viz., as a necessary postulate of practical reason. Kant's God was not qualitatively different from the God of the speculative metaphysicians he criticized; it was only *posited* on different grounds, postulated on the basis of faith, corresponding to practical reason, rather than on the basis of knowledge, corresponding to pure speculative reason. Kant's concept of God was, in short, still predicated on a problematic metaphysical dualism. When Hegel, following Schelling, demonstrated the inadequacy and self-negating nature of this dualism, he therefore radically altered the very metaphysical basis upon which the concept of God would have to be postulated. If Kant's concept of God corresponded in some sense to the noumenal in-itself (posited only as a necessary postulate of practical reason), then its fate was similar: just as Hegel collapsed the distinction between the noumenal and the phenomenal, he collapsed the distinction between the transcendent God which corresponded to this noumenal sphere and the immanent experience of the subject corresponding to the phenomenal sphere. Put more precisely, in collapsing and transcending the Kantian distinction between the noumenal and the phenomenal, Hegel collapsed and transcended the distance between God and humanity. Where Kant's God was transcendental Hegel's God was immanent, or more precisely, transcendent in its immanence. As Beiser writes, "Hegel conceives of God as immanent. God reveals or embodies itself in the finite world and it is inseparable from its embodiment in nature and history."[67]

Hegel's radical transformation of the Kantian conception of God was a direct result, then, of his rejection of Kant's implicit metaphysics. For Hegel, the problem with metaphysics was "not that it attempted to know the infinite, but that it had a *false interpretation* of the infinite as something transcending the finite world of ordinary experience."[68] The problem with this conception of the infinite is that, like Kantian metaphysics as a whole, it is self-negating: "If the infinite were conceived in opposition to the finite," Hegel reasoned, "then it would be finite itself, because it would be limited by the finite."[69] Just as the only solution to the problem of subject-object dualism was to conceive of them as different attributes of the same substance, the only solution to this problem was to conceptualize the finite and the infinite as attributes of the same substance. This meant nothing short of conceptualizing an infinite God in the element of the finite world. Hegel's concept of God thus "preserves the traditional definition of God as the infinite; but it negates the traditional interpretation of the infinite as a supernatural entity that exists apart from its creation."[70]

[67] Beiser, *Hegel*, p.143.
[68] Ibid., p.55.
[69] Ibid., p.142.
[70] Ibid.

For Hegel, Dorrien writes, "The spirit of God and the spirit of humanity — divine reason — have the same essence." As Hegel put it: "Human reason, human spiritual consciousness or consciousness of its own essence, *is* reason generally, is the divine within humanity."[71] Not only does God for Hegel therefore not exist apart from creation, but is in fact dependent on it. "Without the world, God is not God," Hegel declared.[72] God is just as dependent on the world as the world is on God. The life of God is realized in the life of human beings, and only in it. As Redding writes, for Hegel, "the mind of God becomes actual only via its particularization in the minds of 'his' finite material creatures. Thus, in our consciousness of God, we somehow serve to realize his *own* self-consciousness, and, thereby, his own perfection."[73] Since consciousness of the Absolute is "not about the self-knowledge of a finite subject," but "the self-knowledge of the absolute within a finite subject," and since the Absolute is equated with God, it follows, as Hegel writes, that "it is not the so-called human reason with its limits which knows God, but the Spirit of God in man; it is … the self-consciousness of God which knows itself in the knowing of man."[74]

Philosophically speaking, Hegel's Absolute idealism represented another step past Kantian idealism downward from heaven. We have already remarked upon the manner in which Kantian idealism represented a metaphysical descent from traditional speculative metaphysics, a step from heaven to earth which recapitulated the logic of Incarnation, or God's own descent from the misty realms of heaven toward earth. Hegel's absolute idealism represents a further step in the same direction, beyond Kant's transcendental idealism. It was, in a word, more *immanent* than Kantian idealism. While Kant's turn from speculative metaphysics to epistemology represented a step downward from heaven, its own metaphysics prevented this descent from completion. With the noumenal thing-in-itself, Kant retained a residue of heaven. Kantian idealism moved from transcendental metaphysics toward the human subject, but formulated an epistemology which was still in some ways fundamentally predicated on a metaphysical dualism of the transcendent and the immanent. Hegel took a step nearer the earth by dispensing with this heavenly residue, the noumenon, and by transcending the dualism of subject and object, noumenon and phenomenon, transcendent and immanent, divine and human, which, theologically speaking, held heaven and earth apart. With Hegel, then, the secularization of theology was greatly advanced, and to that extent Alasdair MacIntyre is not in my view wrong in characterizing Hegelian idealism as a "secularized version of Christian theology."[75] In the history of Christian theology, it is difficult to think of a figure who, more than Hegel,

[71] Dorrien, *Kantian Reason and Hegelian Spirit*, p.211.

[72] Hegel, qtd. in Beiser, *Hegel*, p.143.

[73] Redding, "Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, op. cit.; see also, Beiser, *Hegel*, p.74.

[74] Quoted in Quentin Lauer, *Hegel's Concept of God* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982), p.44.

[75] Alasdair MacIntyre, *Marxism and Christianity*, London: Duckworth, 1995, p.vi.

had systematically theorized God's immanence, bridging the metaphysical chasm between God and the world. For centuries, so many thinkers had posited God as something transcendent apart from the world, building up a theological edifice on the basis of this infinite qualitative distinction. Hegel blew the whole thing apart. His philosophy was an explosion of God into the world.

But for Hegel, being properly dialectical about it, it was not enough simply to declare, in an *a priori* fashion, the identity of the Absolute and the Christian God; it was necessary to show how the Absolute was derived from Christianity itself. Just as it was necessary from a dialectical point of view to derive the Notion from the object itself, so here, Hegel found it necessary to derive the principle of the Absolute, and the immanent God, from Christianity itself. To be sure, Hegel identified as a Christian philosopher (a Lutheran to be precise) and saw his own philosophy as an exposition of Christianity.[76] Even then, Hegel did not think one could simply proceed from Christianity, just as he protested against Schelling that one could not simply proceed from the Absolute pure and simple. As Dorrien writes, "Hegel did not begin by assuming the truth of Christianity, in the manner of medieval theology. If his philosophy was Christian, as he believed it to be, it was only such by virtue of being led there by the self-determination of reason. His system moved toward the Christian principle, and ultimately affirmed Christianity as the consummate religion, but it did not begin with the principle of any religious tradition."[77] It is important in this connection to stress the passivity of the philosophical observer: the philosopher does not actively lead consciousness, but is "led there" by it. From Hegel's point of view, he was only expressing philosophically in concepts what the Gospel writers, not least the author of John 1:1 had expressed theologically in religious images. His Absolute idealism was merely the philosophical expression of the idea implied in the Incarnation, viz., that *the life of God is realized in the life of human beings*. From this point of view, the general development of modern theology (notwithstanding exceptions like Kierkegaard and Barth) was, on the whole, a movement toward this idea, a gradual recognition of the absolutely paradoxical idea that God is *in the world*, a gradual descent from Heaven to Earth, each of the various moments in the development of modern theology represented a greater or lesser degree of self-consciousness of this idea, i.e., of the Absolute, or Godself.

Hegel's immanent conception of God was derived from his own reading of traditional Christian dogma itself. In Christianity, "[t]he divine nature is the same as the human," Hegel writes.[78] Hegel paid special attention to the narratives of life of Christ, which he reinterpreted in dialectical terms.[79] The Incarnation and Crucifixion were essential expressions of the fundamental

[76] Dorrien, *Kantian Reason and Hegelian Spirit*, pp.190, 222-3.

[77] Ibid., pp.225-6.

[78] Ibid.

[79] See Hegel, *Phenomenology*, §§748-87, pp.453-78.

identity of the divine and human natures. In the Incarnation, "God is sensuously and directly beheld as a Self, as an actual individual man; only so *is* this God self-conscious," Hegel tells us.[80] The Crucifixion no less than the Incarnation stressed that the life of the divine is realized in this world, that God, or the infinite, is not "out there," separate from the finite realm. For Hegel, it is only through Crucifixion, which he interpreted as God's return to Godself through the element of the finite realm, that the identity of the human and the divine is established: "Humanity," Dorrien tells us, "is posited in God's death as a moment of God's being." As Hegel writes, "The identity of the divine and the human means that God is at home with himself in humanity, in the finite, and in [its] death this finitude is itself a determination of God."[81]

Conclusion

We have come to a point where it is possible to summarize, if only in the broadest terms, the general movement which characterizes the development of modern philosophy and liberal theology. We have seen the selfsame movement in the most important figures in this development, Kant, Schelling, and Hegel: each taking a philosophical step down from heaven, a secularization of theology and philosophy corresponding to and recapitulating the (secular) logic of incarnation. Whatever we choose to call this movement, its general characteristic is clear with its stress upon immanence and on the unity of the human and the divine. It was more secular and humanistic, in a sense more worldly, than the theology which preceded it. Kant's Copernican revolution in philosophy not only shifted philosophical attention to the knowing subject, but also changed the focus of philosophy itself from metaphysics to epistemology. But, as the later post-Kantians would protest, it rested on a metaphysical dualism which preserved God's separateness from the world. Hegel therefore took the next step from heaven to earth by dispensing with that residue of heaven, the noumenal in-itself, flattening out Kant's metaphysical dualism between subject and object, collapsing the difference between the divine and the human, putting the theme of modern theology in a phrase: "the divine nature is the same as the human." Although we have dealt here with only Kant, Hegel, and Schelling, and even then, mostly with the first two, what we have suggested generalizes more broadly. The idea that the divine nature is the same as the human was one of the defining traits of modern liberal theology, and it characterized virtually all of those who are typically considered to be part of this tradition. Every thinker from Schleiermacher to Tillich operated, at least implicitly, on the basis of this idea. For Schleiermacher as much as for Hegel, the life of God is realized in the life of human beings. In a letter to his father, Schleiermacher put it thus: "You say that the glorification of God is the end of our being, and I say the glorification of the creature; is not this in the end the same thing? Is not the Creator more and more glorified the happier and the more perfect his

[80] Ibid., p.459.

[81] Hegel, qtd. in Dorrien, *Kantian Spirit and Hegelian Spirit*, p.221.

creatures are?"[82] Tillich operated under similar assumptions. If the life of God was realized in the life of human beings, which is expressed in culture, then theology had to be a theology of human culture. Even the theologies and philosophies of the greatest dissenters in the liberal tradition, those of Kierkegaard and Barth, are defined in relation to this central idea, only negatively rather than positively. Whatever one makes of Kierkegaard's and Barth's alternative to this central idea, crucially, it is this idea and not any other in relation to which their theologies are defined. The whole development of modern theology from Kant through Schelling and Schleiermacher, Hegel and Harnack, even to Tillich, thus represented a progressive secularization of theology, and a corollary recognition of God's immanence.

The general movement toward a recognition of God's immanence is therefore a crucial element of modern philosophy and liberal theology, which cannot in my view be properly understood without it. This much is, I take it, more or less uncontroversial, and is hardly surprising given that the movement described coincides roughly with the rise of secular modernity: it shouldn't surprise us if theology and philosophy began in this period to assume a more decisively secular form, given that the world as a whole, and human existence generally, had by this point begun to understand itself in decidedly more secular terms. It would indeed have been surprising if theology and philosophy were the only things which did *not* become secular. What is perhaps more surprising, and certainly more interesting, is that this general movement parallels and recapitulates the logic of Incarnation. Just as God in the Incarnation deserts the misty realms of heaven for the all-too-human realm of earth, assuming a human form, so modern philosophy and liberal theology deserted the misty realms of speculative metaphysics, turned toward the human subject, and finally, conceived of the divine in human form. We conclude, then: (1) that the development of modern theology is characterized largely by its secularization, and (2) that the secularization of modern theology parallels and structurally recapitulates the Christian logic of Incarnation.

On Hegelian terms, however, one could, and would even be forced to press for an even stronger thesis — that the secularization of modern theology not only recapitulates the logic of Incarnation, but is *identical* with it, that the secularization of modern theology was nothing other than *God's self-revelation*. Once the Hegelian premises are accepted, the logic is strikingly simple. If God is the Absolute; and if the development of modern theology is, like all other forms of philosophical and theological consciousness, the development of the Absolute's consciousness of *itself* as the Absolute, or the Absolute's *self*-consciousness; then it follows that the development of modern theology is the development of the *self*-consciousness of God; and therefore that the development of modern theology is identical with and nothing other than God's *self*-revelation. From this point of view, not only does the general development of modern philosophy and liberal theology

[82] F.D.E. Schleiermacher, qtd. in Dorrien, op. cit., p.87.

just structurally *recapitulate* the logic of Incarnation, but it does so precisely because *the development of modern theology is nothing other than God's self-revelation* — at least if the Hegelian premises of the argument are accepted. The development of modern philosophy and liberal theology was the *mode* in which God had revealed Godself to the world. The development of modern theology was not an *approximation* of God's self-revelation; the development of modern theology *was* God's revelation.

To put it in properly Hegelian terms, the doctrine of Incarnation represents an expression of the Absolute, or God, which was not self-conscious of itself as the Absolute, and the various phases in the historical development of theology represent successively higher degrees of self-consciousness on the part of the Absolute of itself as the Absolute, each subsequent development putting the Absolute, contained in germinal form in the doctrine of Incarnation, in more and more self-conscious form. Here we might think of Hegel's metaphor of the bud, blossom, plant, and fruit. On these terms, the classical account of Incarnation is like the bud, and the various phases of the historical development of theology, including modern theology, are represented in turn by the blossom, plant, and fruit, which is, from this point of view, nothing other than the Absolute which comes to recognize itself as the Absolute through a dialectic that is everywhere marked by a logic of immanence.

Granting certain Hegelian assumptions, the secularization of modern theology can therefore be read as a development out of principles internal to Christianity itself — not something externally or exogenously imposed upon it, but developed out of its own internal impulses inasmuch as the logic of secularization is directly, if implicitly, given in the concept of Christianity itself. If this is true, Christianity is thus put in a somewhat contradictory relation with respect to itself: it is at once secular and religious. God reveals Godself in the element of secularity, an apparent paradox well understood by Kojéve, who suggested that "[t]he whole evolution of the Christian World is nothing but a progress toward the atheistic awareness of the essential finiteness of human existence."[83] But this is not problematic from a dialectical point of view. Karl Marx, that consummate dialectician, in describing his own dialectical method, expressed the basic premise of dialectics when he suggested that "[r]eason has always existed, only not always in reasonable form."[84] The basic premise of dialectics is, in other words, that consciousness is *contradictory*, shot through with contradiction, and only ever expressed in contradictory form. Reason has always existed; human beings always have some basic relation to reality, and therefore some conception of it. But reason is not always in reasonable form; as finite creatures, our conception of reality is never entirely complete or even consistent. It is filled with inconsistencies and contradictions. The content of consciousness contradicts the form in

[83] Alexandre Kojeve, qtd. in Dorrien, *Kantian Reason and Hegelian Spirit*, p.189.

[84] Karl Marx, "For a Ruthless Criticism of Everything Existing," *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978), p.14.

which it is expressed.[85] On these terms, the implicit secular *content* of Christianity, expressed most powerfully in the narratives of Incarnation and Crucifixion, directly contradicts the explicitly *theistic* form in which it is expressed. To invoke the language of classical dialectics, we might say that the secular kernel of Christianity is wrapped in a theistic shell. The contradiction is thus a contradiction between the implicit content of Christianity and its explicit form, and the historical development represents the attempt to put Christianity into self-conscious form, in which the form of consciousness corresponds to its content. To suggest, then, that God reveals Godself in the element of secularity, is not in the final analysis problematic from a dialectical or Hegelian point of view, for from this perspective it is simply not for us to dictate the terms upon which God reveals Godself to the world.

If God elects to reveal Godself in the element of secularity, or even in atheism, we are in no position to protest — something well understood by Bonhoeffer, who wrote so eloquently of a "religionless Christianity," sharply distinguished from Barth's, which Bonhoeffer characterized as a "positivism of revelation, which in the last analysis is essentially a restoration."[86] Instead of a "restoration" of Pauline supernaturalism, Bonhoeffer imagined a truly secular Christianity, however contradictory. We "cannot be honest," he wrote, "unless we recognize that we have to live in the world *etsi deus non daretur*. And this is just what we do recognize — before God! God himself compels us to recognize it … God would have us know that we must live as men who manage our lives without him. The God who is with us in the God who forsakes us (Mark 15.34). The God who lets us live in the world without the working hypothesis of God is the God before whom we stand continually. Before God and with God we live without God."[87] Bonhoeffer grasped the central contradiction with which we are dealing, the same contradiction which worked itself out in the dialectical development of modern theology — God's self-revelation in the element of secularity.

If, to extend Hegel's metaphor, the truth of the bud is shown to be false by the bursting-forth of the blossom which appears as its truth instead, the bud also contains the truth of the blossom, and of the whole plant, though in a form which is subsequently shown to be false, i.e., *in a germinal form*, and the whole truth of the plant is already contained in the bud, the truth of the bud, in turn, contained in the seed, *in germinal form*. The whole dialectical movement of self-becoming of the plant is already contained with its truth in its germinal form in the seed. As Hegel has said, "The principle of

[85] It was precisely on this basis, i.e., on the basis of his own dualistic assumptions about the nature of the secular and the sacred (the very dualism which Hegel sought to transcend), that Kojéve himself (and so many left-wing, atheist interpreters of Hegel) failed to perceive that this "evolution" is not incompatible with Christianity per se, only with its traditional theistic form.

[86] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers From Prison*, enlarged edition, ed. Eberhard Bethge (New York: Touchstone, 1997), pp.280-2.

[87] Ibid., p.360.

Development involves also the existence of a latent germ of being — a capacity or potentiality striving to realize itself … [Spirit] makes itself *actually* what it always was *potentially*."[88] From this it follows that the secularization of modern theology is given in Christianity itself, not least in the concept of Incarnation. In a sense, the whole development of modern theology, from Kant through Schelling and Hegel to Tillich, is contained in the words of the Evangelist: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us" — only, on dialectical grounds, one would have to regard this as having been expressed in a form which contradicted its content, and having required time to work itself out into more self-conscious form.

Whether this strong theological thesis — that the secularization implicit in the development of modern philosophy and theology can, however paradoxically, be identified with God's own self-revelation — whether this can ultimately be sustained depends entirely on whether its Hegelian premises can be affirmed. It is no part of my intention in this essay to either affirm or deny anything in this regard, only to demonstrate the consequences which follow from certain premises in order to illuminate a certain logic that seems to me utterly decisive, and even defining, for the identity of all modern theology, whether one accepts or rejects it. Karl Barth of course rejected these premises categorically, but did so precisely *because* he understood, as I have attempted to show, what kind of view logically follows from them.

So far as modern theology is concerned, the most self-conscious form in which secular logic of incarnation was expressed was undoubtedly Hegel's Absolute idealism. If the Notion which modern theology gradually recognized, i.e., the *central* and in some ways defining idea of modern theology, was the idea that "the divine nature is the same as the human," then in a certain sense Hegel's philosophy represented the partial consummation of modern theology. Others, like Schleiermacher, Harnack, and Tillich, may have proceeded on the basis of this idea, and worked out its implications. But it was Hegel who explicitly theorized and systematically expounded it, meticulously working out its metaphysical basis. It was Hegel who most powerfully expressed the idea which defined the whole development of modern theology — God's immanence.

We should by no means imagine, however, that the development of this idea was consummated in Hegel, or even in Bonhoeffer. Feuerbach and Marx stand in the same relation to Hegel as Hegel stood in relation to Kant, for just as Hegelian idealism represents a dialectical transformation of Kantian idealism, so Feuerbachian and Marxian materialism represents, I think, a dialectical transformation of Hegelian idealism, a further radicalization of its own secular logic. And to the extent that God reveals Godself in the element of secularity, a Hegelian could think of Feuerbach's and Marx's philosophies as different moments in God's self-revelation to

[88] G.W.F. Hegel, Introduction to *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2004), p.54.

the world. From this perspective, it is not Barth and Kierkegaard who represent the continuation of the liberal tradition from Kant to Hegel, but Feuerbach and Marx — as Barth himself would readily have insisted. Kierkegaard and Barth protested *against* the general development of modern theology, in part precisely because they understood its secular implications, because they understood that the secular logic of liberal theology would lead logically to secular philosophy. In this limited sense, it is not entirely unreasonable to regard Feuerbach and Marx as standing in greater contiguity with the tradition of liberal theology than Kierkegaard and Barth, who protested mightily against it. It seems to me one can draw a clearer line of philosophical contiguity from Kant through Hegel to Feuerbach and Marx, who radicalize their logic, than one can from Kant through Hegel to Kierkegaard and Barth. If the general development of modern theology was characterized by God's self-revelation *in the element of secularity*, as Bonhoeffer so keenly grasped, then it is Feuerbach and Marx who are its legitimate heirs. Whether one sees this as a good or bad thing will depend entirely on one's own theological, or anti-theological, presuppositions. Barth, famously, thought it was a disaster for theology. But whether one ultimately joins Hegel, Feuerbach, and Marx in affirming the secularizing logic implicit in the dialectic that characterizes the development of modern philosophy and theology, or joins Kierkegaard and Barth in rejecting *in toto*, or affirms something else entirely, it seems to me that neither the essence of modern theology, nor, *a fortiori*, one's own relation to it, can adequately be comprehended apart from an appreciation of this logic which, for better or worse, characterizes something of the very the soul of modern theology.

Postscript - Kierkegaardian Paradox and Barthian Otherness: Reactions to General Movement of Liberal Theology

Perhaps we have painted too simple a picture of modern theology. We have suggested that the defining trait of modern theology has been its gradual move toward a recognition of God's immanence, from Kant, who bracketed the question of the God of speculative metaphysics, through Hegel and his immanent God, to Schleiermacher, whose God known via the subjectivity of feeling, and Tillich, for whom God is to be found in human culture. But is this perhaps too simple? Do not the great dissenters in the tradition, like Kierkegaard and Barth, complicate the picture we have painted? Not if we understand them in their proper relation to the tradition, viz., as *dissenters*. To claim them as dissenters in this tradition is not to suggest they are not a part of it. Kierkegaard and Barth, as dissenters in the liberal tradition, are dissenters *within* this tradition — in communication with it — and are no more outside of and excluded from this tradition than Marx was from the tradition of classical political economy. Within this tradition, though, Kierkegaard and Barth are *dissenters*, and what they dissent to is nothing other than exactly what we have described as the general development of modern theology — the closing of the gap between heaven and earth, the recognition of God's immanence, and of the fundamental identity of divine and human nature.

Even the protest *against* the general development of modern theology demonstrates the basic validity of our characterization of it, since this protest against modern theology presupposes some definite conception of it, which is broadly consistent with the main themes of what we have established. Here, then, it is important to grasp, as we have already observed, that even the theologies and philosophies of the greatest dissenters in the liberal tradition, are defined in relation to this central idea, only negatively rather than positively, that it is this idea and not any other in relation to which their theologies are defined.

Kierkegaard and Barth both rightly grasped the basic movement which characterized modern theology, which is precisely why they so vehemently protested against it. Kierkegaard understood that the fundamental issue at stake in the development of modern theology was, as we have already established, the issue of God's relation to human beings. For him, not only the soul of modern theology, but the soul of *Christianity as such*, Christianity itself as a whole, hinged on the issue of God's basic relation to humanity, the manner in which God's immanence and transcendence are conceptualized. It was on account of this that the idea of Incarnation assumed such a central importance in Kierkegaard's philosophy. As Climacus writes in the *Philosophical Fragments*: "The heart of the matter is the historical fact that the god has been in human form." It was so central that in fact it defined the whole essence of Christianity: "Even if the contemporary generation had not left anything behind except these words, 'We have believed that in such and such a year the god appeared in the

humble form of a servant, lived and taught among us, and then died' — this is more than enough."[89]

For Climacus, the idea of a "God in time" as he put it was an utter scandal to the Understanding, an "absolute paradox." Kierkegaard appears to agree with Kant about what he, Kierkegaard, calls the "ultimate paradox of thought."[90] Kant opens the preface to the first edition of his *Critique of Pure Reason* with the somber observation, similar to Kierkegaard's, that "Human reason, in one sphere of its cognition, is called upon to consider questions, which it cannot decline, as they are presented by its own nature, but which it cannot answer," not least because when it ventures to answer these questions, it "falls into confusion and contradictions … transcending the limits of experience."[91] Kierkegaard takes a similar position, suggesting that the "ultimate paradox of thought" is "to want to discover something that thought itself cannot think." The Understanding "in its paradoxical passion collides" with the unknown, which Kierkegaard identifies with "the god," his functional proxy for the Christian God.[92] For Kierkegaard, the Understanding cannot grasp the idea of a God in time, which therefore remains an absolute paradox, absolutely ungraspable, absolutely unrecognizable by the Understanding. "Defined as the *absolutely different*," Kierkegaard writes, "the understanding cannot even think the absolutely different" (my emphasis), a statement with which Kant, with a simple change of terminology, would surely have agreed.

Kant and Kierkegaard, then, appear to share similar philosophical assumptions about the nature of the Understanding and its limits. Both concede that God is not cognizable by the Understanding, and remains an absolute scandal to human knowledge. But they propose radically different solutions to the shared problem, this difference being important not least because their separate responses to the problem define the differences between liberal theology, which took after Kant's solution, and neo-orthodox theology, which took after Kierkegaard's. On the basis of a metaphysical dualism between subject and object, and the implicit epistemological limitations this engenders, there appear to be at least two compelling possibilities for faith: (1) for the knowing subject to posit knowledge of God as a necessary postulate of *practical* reason, which was Kant's solution; or (2) for God to reveal *Godself* to the believer in an absolute paradox transcending the Understanding. On the basis of a metaphysical dualism of subject and object which prevents the possibility of genuine knowledge of God, Kant turns toward the subject (his famous Copernican turn), and Kierkegaard turns toward the object, God.[93]

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[89] Johannes Climacus, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. and ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985, p.102-4.

[90] Ibid., pp.37-39.

[91] Kant, Preface to the First Edition, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 2nd ed., p.xvii.

[92] Climacus, *Philosophical Fragments*, pp.37-9.

[93] In at least this sense, Kierkegaard is as much an objectivist as the subjectivist he is often claimed to be.

We have already reviewed Kant's formulation of faith on the basis of his metaphysical dualism, so it is not necessary to recount it here. Kierkegaard expressed the most philosophically coherent alternative to Kant's solution: anti-rational fideism.[94] If, as Kant suggested, God is not cognizable by the Understanding, i.e., if God is not knowable through the active cognitive agency of human beings, then there is only one other alternative, viz., that the knowledge of God is the result of the active agency of human beings, but rather through the active agency of Godself. Here Kierkegaard elaborates what would later be worked into major themes for Barthian and neo-orthodox theologians. Since God is absolutely other, God cannot be known by merely human efforts; rather the only possibility of knowledge of God is God's *self*-revelation: "if a human being is to come truly to know something about the unknown (the god), he must first come to know that it is *different from him, absolutely different from him*. The understanding *cannot come to know this by itself* (since, as we have seen, it is a contradiction); if it is going to come to know this, *it must come to know this from the the god*," (my emphasis) and to even know *that* God is "absolutely different" is not possible by human efforts, but is itself a condition self-disclosed by God.[95]

If, in other words, knowledge of God is not possible through a mere *human* effort, then the only other way in which the knowledge of God can be possible is through a *divine* effort. In God's self-revelation, "the understanding steps aside and the paradox *gives itself*" (my emphasis).[96] This distinction, between the merely human attempt to know God, and the divine effort of *self*-revelation, was the distinction, for Climacus, between Socratic and Christian modes of knowing. For Climacus, the Socratic represented the merely human attempt to know God, and the Christian represented the divine effort on the part of God to reveal Godself to human beings.

For Climacus's Socrates, as for Hegel, "every human being is himself the midpoint, and the whole world focuses only on him because his self-knowledge is God-knowledge." Climacus reminds us that for Socrates, all knowledge is a result of recollection, a remembering of what one already knows, and, crucially, as a result, that the "truth is not *introduced into him*," i.e., by an external being, "but was *in him*" to begin with (my emphasis). The essence of the Socratic conception of knowledge is that, on these terms, the truth is not given to the me from without but rather, "the truth in which I rest was in me and emerged from me."[97]

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[94] I am borrowing Dorrien's characterization here: he refers to Kierkegaard as an "anti-rational fideist who wielded reason as a weapon" (Dorrien, *Kantian Reason and Hegelian Spirit*, p.261).

[95] Climacus, *Philosophical Fragments*, p.46.

[96] Ibid., p.59.

[97] Ibid., pp.9-12.

To this Socratic conception of knowledge, Climacus counterposes a Christian one. If, on Socratic terms, the knowledge of the truth is simply a matter of recollection and the truth is as a result "in me and emerged from me," then on Christian terms, the truth is not from within me, but given to me from without, from God: "[G]od himself … prompts the learner to be reminded that he is un-truth and is that through his own fault."[98] Here we should notice that the active subject not only of this sentence but also of divine knowledge, is not the knowing subject, but the self-revealing God.

Here it is relevant to recognize that Kierkegaard's alternative to Kant's solution to the problem of faith is internally quite consistent. It represents a form of anti-rational fideism. While I don't endorse Kierkegaard's position, it at least has the merit of sharpening the alternatives posed to a view predicated on the metaphysical dualism implicit in Kantian idealism: if one accepts the Kantian limitations on reason, there seem to be only two logically coherent, i.e., internally consistent, philosophical possibilities: (1) practical belief, Kant's position, which suggests that if knowledge of God is not possible through reason, *belief* in God is possible, as a necessary postulate of practical reason; and (2) anti-rational fideism, Kierkegaard's position, which suggests that if knowledge of God is not possible through human reason, it can only be possible through a suspension of reason. Knowledge of god is not possible through human *reason*; therefore, the only possibility for this knowledge is through a suspension of reason. Kant keeps reason and compromises his knowledge of God; Kierkegaard keeps God and compromises on reason — but this is precisely the possibility presented by the metaphysical dualism of Kantian idealism which Kierkegaard by and large presupposes.

Let us for the moment set aside all Kantian objections to Kierkegaard's fideistic position. Even if, on this basis, we assume Kierkegaard's solution to be satisfactory and concede full validity to it, we get nowhere with it, inasmuch as it proceeds on the basis of fundamentally Kantian assumptions about the nature of Understanding, precisely the assumptions which Hegel criticized Kant for. In principle, Hegel would have agreed with Kierkegaard and Kant that the Understanding cannot grasp the idea of God. The *Understanding* cannot grasp the idea of God in time, and the very fact that it can't was precisely his criticism of Kant, viz., that Kantian idealism, representing a form of consciousness corresponding to the Understanding, never developed beyond the Understanding into Reason, the form of consciousness which, to Hegel's mind, can in principle grasp the Absolute, or God. To the extent that Kierkegaard's philosophy proceeds on the basis of the fundamentally Kantian assumption that the Understanding cannot grasp the idea of God, it remains, along with Kantian idealism, within the realm of the Understanding, and is therefore subject to that extent to Hegel's criticism of Kant's metaphysics, i.e., of the metaphysical dualism implied in Kantian idealism. The point here is this: Kierkegaard's philosophy is predicated on the Kantian assumption that the

[98] Ibid., p.15.

Understanding cannot cognize God. It is therefore logically valid to the extent that this assumption obtains. But it was exactly this assumption which Hegel challenged, and to the extent that Hegel's criticism is valid, the Kantian assumption, upon which Kierkegaard's philosophy is predicated, does not hold, but if the assumptions on which Kierkegaard's philosophy is predicated are themselves not valid, then it follows logically that the philosophy which is predicated on these assumptions is itself not valid.

The Barthian Revolt

Barth's theology is in many ways contiguous with Kierkegaard's philosophy. Though there are some substantive differences, Barth's project is more or less identical to Kierkegaard's from the point of view of the specific topic we are investigating, viz., the manner in which God's relation to humanity is conceived. If the general thrust of modern liberal theology was to assert a conception of this relation which stressed God's immanence and the identity of divine and human nature, then the characteristic which unites Barth and Kierkegaard is precisely a reaction against the general development of liberal theology, a conception of God's relation to humanity which stresses not God's immanence, but God's transcendent otherness, not the identity of the divine and human nature, but an "absolute difference." On *this* point, Barth adopts most of Kierkegaard's major themes. As Dorrien writes, "[a]ll of Kierkegaard's major theological concepts were there" in Barth's theology — of particular interest for us: God's absolute otherness, God not human beings as the active agent of knowledge of God, fideism, and an anti-philosophical posture.[99] Where Kierkegaard spoke of God as "the absolutely different," Barth spoke of God not as "a thing among other things," but as the "Wholly Other."[100] And Barth, like Kierkegaard, stressed that the active agent of revelation is not the human being, but God. In one sense, Barth simply gave Kierkegaard's major themes more systematic form and expression.

For Barth, the need to reject the basic idea of liberal theology was more historical and personal than for Kierkegaard. In August 1914, when Barth witnessed all of his liberal teachers rallying to the Kaiser's call to war, Barth, we're told, "read the manifesto with revulsion … The spectacle of seeing his mentors promote the Kaiser's militarism … and their failure to even raise the question of national idolatry made him doubt the integrity of their theology."[101] We might pause to notice the *non-sequitur* here. Liberal theologians' support for a war in no way necessarily implies anything one way or another about liberal theology itself. To presume so is to presume some necessarily relation between what one believes and what one does, which fails to distinguish between an idea and what people who believe it happen to do. This isn't to suggest that there is no relation between what one believes and what one does; I'm not a radical cynic. Of course some

[99] Dorrien, *Kantian Reason and Hegelian Spirit*, p.468.

[100] Barth, qtd. in Dorrien, op. cit., p.463.

[101] Ibid., p.456.

ideas lend themselves to certain kinds of actions more than others. But the relation between what one believes and what one does is hardly automatic. It has to be argued, and in the case of liberal theology, it's not an easy case to make, if only because there have been many theological liberals who do not support militarism, Nazism, or any of its variants. One can easily think of Rauschenbusch, whose theology is deeply liberal, or of Martin Luther King, Jr., who, according to Cone, "thought of himself as a liberal, philosophical theologian who opposed [both] the narrow 'fundamentalism' of his Baptist upbringing and it's more sophisticated expressions in the neo-orthodox theology of … Karl Barth."[102] This isn't to say there is no relation between the substance of liberal theology and support for militarism on the part of liberal German theologians, but rather that a case needs to be made, which can only come by way of a theological critique.

For Barth, liberal theology had failed to recognize God's transcendent otherness, having stressed instead God's immanence and the knowledge of God possible through subjectivity, through the knowing subject. "Liberal theology made the human subject the subject of theology and turned Christ into a mere predicate; therefore it had to be replaced."[103] Liberal theology, one Barth scholar writes, replaced "a radical account of God's connection to humanity with a merely relational one."[104] And Barth's argument against this position seems to be that it is not consistent with the view expressed by the Christian *scriptures*, scriptures which do not stress the human creature's active knowledge of God, but God's "utter subjectivity as the one who manifests himself in grace."[105] Scripture thus assumes a special importance in Barth's threefold theological system as the record of the unique self-revelation of God in the person of Jesus Christ, and Barth himself acknowledges that his view of scripture is akin to what he calls the "venerable doctrine of inspiration."[106]

Here the question naturally presents itself: on what external basis is scripture to be taken to be the unique and authoritative revelation of God? Barth's answer is characteristically fideistic: scripture is it's own proof, and does not therefore require any other demonstration. As Barth writes, "By the Spirit scripture bears witness that it is God's Word. It needs no other arguments, and there is no possibility of doubting it, because *in* it … God the Spirit bears witness to himself."[107] For Barth, the "meaning of scripture is knowable only in faith through the power of the Holy Spirit, which is the Spirit of the Bible."[108] For Barth, then, the authority of scripture ultimately rests upon an implicit theological basis, viz., that it is God's self-

[102] James Cone, *Martin and Malcolm and America: A Dream or a Nightmare?*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991, p.132.
[103] Dorrien, *Kantian Reason and Hegelian Spirit*, p.505.
[104] John Webster, *Barth*, London: Continuum, 2000, p.26.
[105] Ibid., p.31.
[106] Barth, qtd. in Webster, *Barth*, p.30.
[107] Barth, qtd. in Dorrien, *Kantian Reason and Hegelian Spirit*, p.476.
[108] Ibid., p.475.

revelation.[109] A proper analysis of Barth's theology, then, requires an investigation of his conception of God's self-revelation.

For Barth, the error of liberal theology consisted in its subjectivity, in its procession from the subject of knowing rather than from the object of its apprehension, i.e., God. Kant's Copernican shift had shifted focus from the known object to the knowing subject, as he argued that metaphysics always presupposed some kind of fundamental epistemology, i.e., that that in our attempts to know some metaphysical object, we are already implicated as subjects. Liberal theology followed Kant, and Barth tried to reverse it, returning essentially, to a kind of pre-modern metaphysics which was characteristic not only of Reformation theologians like Luther, but also of third-century theologians like Origen.[110]

Barth attempts to avoid the Kantian critique, but in the final analysis, he fails. He attempted to "spell out a properly Christian sense of the objectivity of God, with the aim not so much of meeting the Kantian challenge head-on as subverting it by refusing to be trapped within its categories," Webster writes.[111] He replaces the Kantian dualism between the unknowable noumenon and the knowable phenomenon with a distinction between God's primary and secondary objectivity. If for Kant the noumenon is mediated to the subject by the categories of experience, for Barth, the *incarnation* is what mediates God's primary and secondary objectivity. As Dorrien writes, "If Kant was right about human knowing, which Barth did not doubt, God must make God's self known as *phenomenal* if God is to be known … In Christ, Barth reasoned, God becomes present to human knowing as the subject of human knowing, not its object."[112] Here, Barth, like Kierkegaard, maintains fundamentally Kantian assumptions, and turns Christ into the knowable phenomenon of a noumenal God. But insofar as Barth is properly Kantian in his assumptions, all of Hegel's valid criticisms of Kant apply, and we might ask, along with Hegel, on what *basis* the noumenal God, Barth's equivalent of the Kantian in-itself, is posited in the first place, since, being by definition unknowable, one cannot, as it were, get "behind" it. Here, Barth, unlike Kant, does have an answer, but insofar as he provides an answer, it violates the Kantian proscriptions. On what basis, we ask, does Barth posit a noumenal God (or God's primary objectivity) in the first place? For Barth, it is God who bestows Godself in secondary objectivity, and establishes the ground for asserting this. But this is an unwarranted predication of the noumenon, or God's primary objectivity, and is as such beyond the possibility of experience, subject once more to the Kantian limitations. Here we can see the manner in which Barth is epistemologically stuck, as it were, between Kant and Hegel: to the extent

[109] See Dorrien, *Kantian Reason and Hegelian Spirit*, p.478.

[110] See Origen, *On First Principles*, trans. Frederick Crombie, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1895; Robert Berchmann, *From Philo to Origen: Middle Platonism in Transition*, Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1984.

[111] Webster, *Barth*, p.77.

[112] Dorrien, *Kantian Reason and Hegelian Spirit*, p.566.

that he evades Kant, he is blocked by Hegel, and to the extent that he evades Hegel, he is blocked by Kant. Barth attempts to address the Kantian critique by making Christ the knowable phenomena (God's secondary objectivity) of a noumenal God (God's primary objectivity), but in order to evade the Hegelian objection (to the postulation of the in-itself, or God's primary objectivity), he *blatantly* violates the Kantian critique of dogmatic metaphysics.

Barth, then, gets a little farther than Kierkegaard. In a sense, Barth merely gives the principal themes of Kierkegaard's philosophy more systematic expression, but he does not progress much beyond Kierkegaard, and Kierkegaard's philosophical problems are Barth's as well. To the extent, then, that Barth recycles Kierkegaardian concepts as well as their errors and inadequacies, we can criticize Kierkegaard's philosophy and Barth's theology as one.

Contra Kierkegaard, Contra Barth

If the movement which characterized the general development of modern theology was a movement toward a recognition of God's immanence, the most powerful dissent against this development was expressed by Kierkegaard and Barth, both of whom emphatically asserted God's "infinite qualitative distance." The general movement of modern theology is thus discernible not only in its positive historical development, but also in the strong reactions against it. Even the protest against modern theology defines itself in relation to what we have suggested was its central development, the idea that divine and human nature are one, only it defines itself negatively in relation to this idea — and it is substantial proof in favor of our thesis that it is this idea rather than some other in relation to which such dissent is defined. Because Barth was so strongly influenced by Kierkegaard and to a considerable degree merely systematized his chief concepts, both can be taken together to represent substantially the alternative posed to modern liberal theology. But the alternative, which is characteristic of what is called neo-orthodox theology, is inadequate on several counts.

Against liberal theology's turn toward the subject, toward the human, Kierkegaard and Barth in a sense stressed a *return* toward the object, toward God. If liberal theology was characterized by a certain emphasis on subjectivity, then, we might say Kierkegaardian philosophy and Barthian theology were characterized by a reassertion of *objectivity*. The problem with this return to the object is that it is self-defeating, that it simply begs all of the questions — precisely the questions which liberal theology sought to question. It leaves as much in need of explanation as it ostensibly seeks to explain. It was precisely this in which Kant's major contribution to philosophy consisted, as he well understood, comparing it to Copernicus's revolution in the sciences. As Kant grasped, the knowing subject is always already implicated in every act of knowing, and there is no way around this fact. A pure and simple return to the object therefore gets us nowhere,

because the knowing subject is already implicated, even in the very construction of so-called "objective" knowledge, and every objective metaphysics always already implies a kind of subjective epistemology. For Kant this was an unavoidable fact. It's not as if one could simply avoid the subject or epistemology; these are necessarily *implied* whether one wants it or not, and these assumptions are present whether one is aware of them or not. On this basis, an account of so-called *objective* truth (or an account for which the truth resides in the *object* of knowledge) simply *begs the (subjective) question*. From a Kantian point of view, then, a simple return to the object is not so much incorrect as it is *naive*, and inadequate.

From a Hegelian point of view as well, an account of so-called *objective* truth (for which the object is the essence of truth) always already implies a *subjective* account of truth (for which the subject is the essence of truth). The move away from the knowing subject, from subjectivity toward objectivity, is a definite philosophical position, which Hegel calls "sense-certainty," the lowest and most simplistic form of consciousness which Hegel examines in the course of the *Phenomenology*. As Hegel writes in the *Phenomenology*, "One of the terms posited in sense-certainty in the form of a simple, immediate being, or as the essence, [is] the *object*; the other however, is posited as what is unessential and mediated, something which in sense-certainty is not *in itself* but through an other, the 'I,' a *knowing* which knows the object only because the *object* is, while the knowing may either be or not be. But the object *is*: it is what is true, or it is the essence."[113] But the very experience of sense-certainty reverses this relation between subject and object. The very act of knowing discloses the manner in which the "objective" content is mediated by the knowing subject and has meaning only through the subject who gives it meaning. As one commentator writes, "This, then, brings about a reversal of roles in regard to the essential and the inessential. it is no longer the object which is essential and the knowing the inessential; what is essential is what one *means*, and the object is not essentially an object until it is *meant* …"[114] Here, Hegel was merely restating Kant, with whom he basically agreed; only he felt that Kant never got past this position, for reasons we have already explored.

Hegel and Kant, the, both grasped the fundamental inadequacy of accounts of truth which proceed from the object. Kierkegaard rightly grasped that the *only* way around this criticism, i.e., the only way to return to the object, was through some kind of anti-rational fideism. Barth tried to get around Kant. But as we saw, he failed, and in fact got no farther than Kierkegaard, leaving us, on Kantian grounds, with no option but Kierkegaardian fideism, which Barth shared, as the only compelling alternative to Kant's formulation of faith. But anti-rational fideism is uncompelling for its own reasons.

[113] Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p.59.

[114] Quentin Lauer, *A Reading of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, New York: Fordham University Press, 1976, p.48.

There is a very simple reason I cannot endorse anti-rational fideism of the sort Kierkegaard and Barth espouse, viz., that it violates the most elementary principles of rationality, not least the principle of universality — the notion that we should apply the same standards to ourselves that we apply to others. Suppose for instance that I told you that some deity called the flying Spaghetti monster reveals himself through grace to me. Not only do I not think any rational person would pay much attention to me; I doubt any Barthian Kierkegaardian would, which would suggest that these fideists hold standards of rationality for others that they do not hold themselves to — what's known in the technical theological literature as "pure hypocrisy," which is, in my view, the basic problem with any kind of fideistic position.

To reject the idea that we should apply the same standards of rationality to ourselves that we apply to others is to reject the most elementary principles of rational discourse, to annihilate the possibility of rational communication, and thus, as Hegel writes, to "[trample] underfoot the roots of humanity. For it is the nature of humanity," he explains, "to press onward to agreement with others; human nature only really exists in an achieved community of minds." The basic posture of Kierkegaard's and Barth's fideism was well described by Hegel, who criticized those who, in the place of substantive philosophical inquiry, content themselves with "revelations from heaven" — in this case literally — as philosophically simplistic, appealing "to an oracle in his breast, he is finished and done with anyone who does not agree; he has only to explain that he has no more to say to anyone who does not find and feel the same in himself."[115]

Anti-rational fideism is also inconsistent with the logic of Incarnation. The chief significance of God's self-revelation through the Son consists in the fact that God, depicted in the form of the Father, is only known through the Son, who is fully human — but if the Son is *fully* human, then this means that *every aspect* of the Son is human, including his faculties of cognition, and it follows therefore that God is known only through human reason. God the Father is known to Christ through Christ's fully human faculties of cognition, which are, inasmuch as they are fully human, the same as every other human being's faculties of cognition. But insofar as this conception was expressed in the terms of traditional theism, it was logically contradictory. Kant showed that the God of traditional theism could not be known through the faculties of cognition because as the unconditioned as such, this God *ipso facto* lacked the conditions of possible experience, and was as such, not cognizable. If the Christian assertion that God was fully revealed through the Son was to have any veracity, then, it would be necessary to reconceptualize God. This was the only logical alternative: either the Christian God would have to be reconceptualized from its traditional theistic form, or else the Christian claim that God revealed Godself through the fully human Son was false. The development of modern theology, then, represented an effort, consummated in Hegelian

[115] G.W.F. Hegel, Preface to *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p.43.

idealism, to do the necessary work and reconceptualize this God. Fideism of the sort that Barth and Kierkegaard advocate, then, is not only inimical to reason, but also, as I see it, to basic Christian principles, like applying the same standards to oneself that one applies to others, and striving for a common community of minds, as well as the logic of Incarnation.

Kantian idealism, then, represents a more compelling account of faith than the anti-rational fideism of Kierkegaard and Barth. But so far we have only dealt on Kantian grounds. We have not even spoken of Hegel (except insofar as Hegel takes a Kantian position) in relation to Kierkegaard and Barth because, in one sense, it is not even possible to. Here it is not even possible to speak of Hegel. It would be senseless to compare the merits of Hegel's absolute idealism with Kierkegaardian philosophy and Barthian theology because Kierkegaard and Barth never even got past *Kant*. If Hegelian idealism represents a more compelling philosophical account than Kantian idealism, then it makes little sense to compare Hegelian idealism with Kierkegaardian or Barthian fideism, which did not even get past Kant. It would rather be like comparing Michelangelo with someone who hasn't yet learned how to draw faces, or to paint in more than two colors.

It is not as if Kierkegaard and Barth provide less compelling answers to the same questions Hegel deals with, but rather that they do not provide any answers at all. Not being able to get *beyond* Kant, they simply ignore the questions which Hegel, who did get past Kant, grappled with. Kierkegaard and Barth did not even provide answers to Kant's questions (especially as they relate to the subject's role in the construction of knowledge), still less those questions posed by Hegel which even Kant did not grapple with, viz., those questions of the metaphysics implied in epistemology, specifically as they relate to the questions of the metaphysical dualism implied in Kantian idealism. Hegel is so far *ahead* of Kierkegaard and Barth, and they are so far behind him, that it is not even possible to compare them. In the range of issues Hegel even *addressed*, Hegel is so much more philosophically sophisticated than Kierkegaard and Barth that there is not even some common standard by which to make such a comparison.

It would be senseless, then, to attempt to compare Barth and Kierkegaard with Hegel because he is so much more philosophically sophisticated than they are. Kant is more philosophically sophisticated than Kierkegaard and Barth, and Hegel is more philosophically sophisticated than Kant. Where Kierkegaard and Barth are philosophically *behind* Kant, Hegel is philosophically ahead. Where Kant represents a philosophical development of the position which Kierkegaard and Barth represented, Hegel represents himself a philosophical development of the position which Kant represented. From this point of view, Kierkegaardian philosophy and Barthian theology represent forms of theological consciousness which are *chronologically* posterior to liberal theology, but *logically* anterior to it. Barth's so-called negation of liberal theology is typically misunderstood. Logically speaking, Barth's infamous "NO!" was therefore not so much the negation of liberal theology as it was the expression of liberal theology's

negation of the traditional theological worldview which Barth's theology represented. The very attempt to reverse the course of liberal theology in a way demonstrated its logical necessity and philosophical validity.

If Barth rejected God's immanence with an emphatic "NO," and, contra Hegel, conceived of God as a "pure negation" rather than a determinate negation of the world, Kierkegaard similarly replaced Hegel's concept of contradiction with his own concept of paradox.[116] Where a dialectical relationship of God and humanity conceives of this relation as mediated, a paradoxical conception of this relation conceives of this relation without mediation, of God as totally separate. But insofar as the fundamental premise of dialectics is the finite nature of human knowledge, it is more consistent with the Christian conception of human beings as finite and sinful. This, I think, is what is fundamentally at stake not only in the difference between a dialectical conception of the relation of God to human beings, but also in the difference between the liberal conception of God generally and the Kierkegaardian and Barthian alternatives to it. Kierkegaard and Barth both conceive of knowledge of God as fundamentally proceeding from God. The essence of Christianity is precisely that it is, for them, of God and from God, and given by God. The error of liberal theology was to have reduced Christianity to a *merely human* construct. Barth thus protested the idolatry implied: genuine theology is the Word of *God*, but liberal theology had reduced theology to the Word of *Man*.[117] Now, if Barth is right, then he does seem to have a case for criticizing the subjective or transcendental idealism of liberal theology for its idolatrous worship of human intelligence. But if, as I have argued, Barth (and Kierkegaard) are *wrong*, his own theology is idolatrous. If Barth is wrong, then all theology is the "Word of Man" and he merely conceits theology with being the Word of God. From this point of view, both Barth and, say, Tillich, write "Word of Man" theologies, but Tillich at least has the modesty to admit it, while Barth conceits himself that he is doing something different. The fundamental conviction of liberal theology, following from its own secularization of theology, is that the attempt to know God is a human and therefore fallible enterprise. As someone once put it to me, theology is "not a divine word, but a human word about the divine." If this is true and Barth is wrong, if all theology is only really a human project, then Barth, in suggesting that theology is a divine enterprise, the self-revelation of God, in effect simply divinizes and idolizes human intelligence *about God*. This is especially consequential and doubly ironic if we consider the practical implications. Barth protested that liberal theology was fundamentally idolatrous, which led it to support a demonic political regime. Quite aside from this being predicated, as we have seen, on a logical *non-sequitur*, it is not only wrong, but nearly the opposite of the truth. If what we have said about Barthian theology and Kierkegaardian philosophy is correct, then it is not the rational attitude of liberal theology but the anti-rational fideism of Barth's and Kierkegaard's position with the

[116] Dorrien, *Kantian Reason and Hegelian Spirit*, pp.282-3.

[117] Ibid., p.467.

idolatry involved in it which so often lends itself to demonic regimes. From a practical point of view, the the fundamental difficulty of maintaining a Kierkegaardian or Barthian kind of fideism, indeed of maintaining an anti-rational fideism of any sort, is that one has to explain even how the most vile dictator would disagree with it's basic premise, "revelation." What dictator would not smile at the fideistic incantation, 'suspend reason, trust me'?