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Abstract

This dissertation shows that the unity of the philosophical, religious, and aesthetic developments during the period 1770–1830 only comes fully to light when viewed with respect to debates on the concept of divine revelation. The connection between religion and philosophy during this period is not written on the surface of the major texts. To solicit the animating religious issues, this study employs an interdisciplinary approach that draws both on recent reassessments of German Idealism (e.g., Pippin, McDowell, Brandom) and on twentieth-century philosophical theology. My argument turns on a comparison of the Idealist philosophical position with the theorization of revelation articulated by the Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar. Following von Balthasar, I contend that the concept of divine revelation rests on epistemological categories that Kant, Fichte, and Hegel sought to overcome, specifically the categories of non-conceptual knowledge, mystery, and rational finitude. The guiding Idealist notion of an autonomous, self-articulating reason amounts to a sustained and sophisticated rejection of invocations of divine revelation as an explanation of religious belief and faith practices. Moreover, approaching this material from the standpoint of theology makes it possible to show that Goethe's theorization of the revelation of nature in his *Farbenlehre* and in his scientific work more generally constitutes a substantive alternative to the views of his philosophical contemporaries. Indeed, his complex conception of human finitude anticipates 20th-century notions of finitude that would receive canonical formulation in the work of Martin Heidegger.

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Introduction

This project began as an attempt to explain how Hans Urs von Balthasar could plausibly

characterize the spirit of his entire theological oeuvre with the following remark:

> Es gibt ein Buch von Simmel, das heißt "Kant und Goethe." [Karl] Rahner hat
> Kant, oder wenn Sie wollen, Fichte gewählt, den transzendentalen Ansatz. Und
> ich habe Goethe gewählt—als Germanist. Die Gestalt, die unauflösbar einmalige,
> organische, sich entwickelnde Gestalt—ich denke an Goethes "Metamorphose der
> Pflanzen"—, diese Gestalt, mit der Kant auch in seiner Ästhetik nicht zu Rande
> kommt…[1]

What makes this passage so intriguing is its suggestion that we can understand how the leading

figures in 20th-century Catholic theology differ only if we refer to currents of modern

philosophical and aesthetic thought. Instead of referring to historical theological divisions—

Alexandria and Antioch, Thomas and Scotus, Jansenists and Jesuits, or any number of other

well-trodden disputes in the history of Christian thought—von Balthasar appeals to a contrast

between Kant and Goethe. A pair less inclined to traditional forms of theological speculation

could hardly be conceived. It only adds to the intrigue that von Balthasar does not cite a Catholic

theologian in support of this schema, but a secular theorist of culture who came to be known as

one of the founding figures of modern sociology.[2] It is a central aim of this dissertation to

support von Balthasar's suggestion that such secular individuals and their thought ought to be

objects of enduring interest in the agenda of Christian theology. At the most general level, the

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[1] Michael Albus, "Geist und Feuer. Ein Gespräch mit Hans Urs von Balthasar," *Herder-Korrespondenz* 30 (1976): 72–82, here 76.

[2] Of course, when von Balthasar suggests that Kant and Goethe represent separable positions that can be independently occupied, he is going against the grain of the core thought in Simmel's essay. On Simmel's view, these two thinkers each embody the purest version of the two antagonistic conceptual currents between which modern thought eternally oscillates. See pp. 131–135 and 165–166 of Georg Simmel, "Kant und Goethe. Zur Geschichte der modernen Weltanschauung," in *Philosophie der Mode, Die Religion, Kant und Goethe, Schopenhauer und Nietzsche*, ed. Michael Behr, Volkhard Krech and Gert Schmidt (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1995), 119–166.

question I am asking is: how can non-religious philosophical positions come to have a substantive bearing on theological reflection?

Before turning to that issue directly, I must address an objection that would challenge the tenability of such a project from the outset. On this view, posing the question in the terms I just have requires confusing two spheres of knowledge that have no real contact with one another. As a matter of principle, so the story goes, philosophy cannot exercise any meaningful influence on the content of theology, and vice versa.[3] This is because theological and philosophical claims rely on fundamentally different criteria for their justification. In the case of theology, a claim derives its truth solely from the fact that God has revealed it to be true. Such a belief cannot be derived independently of an act of revelation by God. It is much more difficult to delineate what exactly counts as a philosophical claim, but I think it is uncontroversial to say that philosophy certainly is not *that*. Were a philosopher to argue that something is true because God says so, she would not be engaging in philosophy. It is fundamental to what philosophy is that the philosopher cannot appeal to divine revelation as a reason that we should accept a given claim. On the basis of this difference, the objector would conclude that although philosophy and theology can influence one another in an indirect fashion—as when philosophers are constrained to address a certain set of themes because they live in a society that is strictly regulated by religious belief—such interaction remains incidental to the theoretical issues proper to both endeavors, which remain categorically independent in respect to subject matter.

The claim that there is such an absolute category difference between faith and reason provides the basis of objection that they cannot interact in a meaningful, non-accidental way.

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[3] For an exemplary defense of such a position, see Leo Strauss, "Reason and Revelation (1948)," in Heinrich Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theological-Political Problem*, trans. Marcus Brainard (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 141–167; especially pertinent are section 6: "Philosophy cannot refute revelation" (150–155) and section 8: "Revelation cannot refute philosophy" (161–164).

Thus, when von Balthasar suggests that such mutual influence can and does take place, he must also be committing himself to the claim that philosophical thought and religious belief exhibit some commonality in their respective forms of knowledge. If this is the case, then it must be possible to show that something analogous to divine revelation plays an essential role in the ordinary uses of reason. If this could be demonstrated, then von Balthasar would be justified in claiming that the epistemological categories that we take to be involved in divine revelation are also relevant to philosophical inquiry. It would also imply that how the philosopher conceives of such categories will influence how she conceives of divine revelation. *If*—and this is a significant if—this could be shown, then it would follow that a given philosophical theory coordinates with certain theological positions and excludes others. This would get us closer to explaining why von Balthasar believes that a constellation of 18th-century thinkers provides the clearest lens for understanding the contemporary theological landscape.

There is a second confusing aspect of von Balthasar's statement, an element that is less substantive but more mysterious: why did von Balthasar believe that the thought of Goethe, Germany's preeminent poet, provided the relevant philosophical point of contrast to what he found objectionable in Kant and Fichte? His reference to the term *Gestalt* does not do much in the way of explanation.[4] While the word occasionally appears in Goethe's work, it is never systematically developed as a term of art in the same way as, say, *Idee*, *Erfahrung*, or

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[4] This reference to a notion of *Gestalt* with Goethean origins is not an isolated occurrence in von Balthasar's writings. Here is another typically laudatory description of his debt to Goethe: "Aber ich studierte in Wien nicht Musik, sondern vor allem Germanistik, und was ich dort lernte, war das, was ich später in meinem theologischen Schriftum [sic] ins Zentrum stellte: Das Erblicken-, Werten- und Deutenkönnen einer *Gestalt*, […] und dies Gestaltsehen verdanke ich dem, der nicht abließ, aus dem Chaos von Sturm und Drang auftauchend, lebendige Gestalt zu sehen, zu schaffen, zu werten: Goethe. Ihm danke ich dieses für alles Hervorgebrachte entscheidende Werkzeug," Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Dank des Preisträgers an der Verleihung des Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart-Preises am 22. Mai 1987 in Innsbruck," in Elio Guerriero, *Hans Urs von Balthasar. Eine Monographie*, trans. Carl Franz Müller (Freiburg: Johannes Verlag Einsiedeln, 1993), 419–424, here 420. None of these invocations, however, expand on where in Goethe's writings he sees this term deployed in a fashion analogous to his own use of it in *Herrlichkeit*.

Anschauung. In fact, the preface to the *Hefte zur Morphologie* introduces the term *Gestalt* only for the sake of calling attention to the fact that this expression is *inadequate* for use in a morphological investigation.[5] A study of Goethe's use of *Gestalt*, in other words, would not reveal much about either what von Balthasar means by this term or what it is that he finds theologically promising in Goethe's thought. And it doesn't help matters that von Balthasar never documented which aspects of Goethe's work he took *Gestalt* to capture. It is true that he appeals to a text by Goethe in his most explicit discussion of the term's theological significance, but the passage he refers to there comes from an early fragment in which the word *Gestalt* does not even appear.[6] Similarly, neither of von Balthasar's extended theological assessments of Goethe's thought identify a work or passage that develops the notion of *Gestalt* in a way that anticipates von Balthasar's use of the term.[7] All of this is to say that a strictly philological approach does not present a promising method for understanding von Balthasar's claim that Goethe's thought presents a privileged resource for contemporary theological reflection.

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[5] Here is the relevant passage: "Wollen wir also eine Morphologie einleiten, so dürfen wir nicht von Gestalt sprechen; sondern wenn wir das Wort brauchen, uns allenfalls dabei nur die Idee, den Begriff oder ein in der Erfahrung nur für den Augenblick Festgehaltenes denken," Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Sämtliche Werke. Briefe, Tagebücher und Gespräche*," ed. Friedmar Apel et al., 40 volumes, Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1987–2013, division I, volume 24, 392. Unless noted otherwise, all citations of Goethe's works and letters are from this edition (henceforth FA), and will be cited by division, volume, and page number (e.g., FA I 24: 392).

[6] See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit. Eine theologische Ästhetik. Band III, 1: Im Raum der Metaphysik. Teil 1: Altertum* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1965), 29–39; the citation in question appears at 31–32. The reference is to the early fragment that has come to be called "Studie nach Spinoza." It is telling for von Balthasar's understanding of Goethe, however, that he introduces this text as "die fälschlich so genannte 'Studie nach Spinoza'," 31, n. 13.

[7] 'See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Apokalypse der deutschen Seele. Studien zu einer Lehre von letzten Haltungen. Band I: Der deutsche Idealismus*, 3rd ed. (Freiburg: Johannes Verlag Einsiedeln, 1998), 407–514, but see especially 438–440; and Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit. Eine theologische Ästhetik. Band III, 1: Im Raum der Metaphysik. Teil 2: Neuzeit* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1965), 682–748. Von Balthasar's assessment of Goethe in these works has been the topic of two recent studies: Peter Hofmann, "Balthasar liest Goethe. Die Apokalypse der deutschen Seele als theologische divina comedia," in Letzte Haltungen: Hans Urs von Balthasars "Apokalypse der deutschen Seele"—neu gelesen, ed. Barbara Hallensleben and Guido Vergauwen (Freiburg: Academic Press Freiburg, 2006), 83–100; and Peter Legnowski, "Die letzte 'säkulare Verwirklichung der Herrlichkeit.' Zur Goethe Rezeption Hans Urs von Balthasars," in *Die Logik der Liebe und die Herrlichkeit Gottes: Hans Urs von Balthasar im Gespräch. Festgabe für Karl Kardinal Lehmann zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed. Walter Kardinal Kasper (Ostfildern: Mathias-Grünewald-Verlag, 2006), 134–145.

Although versions of this claim appear frequently in his writings, they always occur at a level of generality that precludes specifying their exact meaning.

Rather than pursuing the unpromising exegetical task of identifying the sources from which von Balthasar drew his notion of *Gestalt*, in what follows I will adopt a substantive approach to the issues that are raised in von Balthasar's remark about Kant, Goethe, and the term *Gestalt*. Although I will take my lead from von Balthasar, I will be primarily concerned with the inner logic of the theological and philosophical issues that he is concerned with. The claims I will make are, of course, invested in and bound to what von Balthasar took himself to be arguing. The following study proceeds under the methodological assumption, however, that grasping von Balthasar's meaning is not merely a matter of exegetical precision but is also essentially bound to independent consideration of the issues at hand.[8] It is the latter aspect of interpretation with which my dissertation will primarily concern itself.

Adopting such an approach first calls for reframing the issue in the form of the following two questions: how can a notion with its home in philosophical aesthetics come to be theologically relevant? And what philosophical position does Goethe occupy with respect to Kant and his successors? Of course, presenting the questions in this way deprives them of any immediate thematic connection. The first is a question of philosophical theology, while the latter is an issue of historical hermeneutics. Both can be (and frequently have been) pursued independently, and there is no *a priori* reason to suppose that either has a bearing on the other. In the coming pages, I will pick up on von Balthasar's suggestion that this appearance of logical independence is misleading, and that the answers to these two questions are in fact intimately

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[8] This methodology and these formulations draw on the discussion in Robert Brandom, *Tales of the Might Dead: Historical Essays in the Metaphysics of Intentionality* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2002), 90–118.

related. In what follows, I will try to substantiate this by making a twofold claim: a) there is a coherent logic to the sorts of philosophical positions that emerged within the Age of Goethe, and b) this logic turns on an implicit relation that these positions exhibit with respect to the concept of divine revelation.

This will first entail considering under what circumstances a theological problem would necessitate appealing to forms of knowledge proper to aesthetic experience. I will approach this topic by examining the philosophical presuppositions of the concept of divine revelation. Following von Balthasar, my claim is that revelation calls for a form of knowledge whose structure is akin to the experience of an aesthetic object. The point here is not to categorize revelation as an instance of aesthetic experience, but rather to bring into view how conceptual resources native to aesthetics can serve as a point of reference for our understanding of a theological problem. Addressing this topic will provide an answer to the theological question implied in von Balthasar's remark. Before outlining the strategy that my argument will pursue, however, I first have to say something about how this approach bears on the second issue, the historical question regarding Goethe's position within 18th-century philosophy.

Recent studies of this period have rightly emphasized that a theological agenda did not animate the response of Kant's successors to the claims of critical philosophy. This assessment of Idealist thought responds to an earlier understanding of Idealism centered on an interpretation of Hegel that dominated his reception for much of the 19th and 20th centuries. According to this view, what Hegel took his philosophy to propose was a quasi-religious metaphysics inspired by but ultimately superior to the doctrines of Lutheran Christianity. This school of interpretation, popularized by a number of Hegel's own students (the so-called Old Hegelians), claimed that the Hegelian project culminated in a direct insight into the essence of God and his processual

actualization in human history. Proponents of this theological view frequently appealed a host of

metaphysical commitments that were meant to explain exactly how Hegel could justify such a

claim.[9] This would typically involve invoking Hegel's more grandiose formulations—certain

remarks about the all-encompassing nature of *Geist*, for instance, or about knowing the mind of

God at the moment of creation—to argue that the center of Hegel's philosophy is occupied by a

World Spirit that makes his monolithic system possible, a kind of metaphysical monism built on

the premise that the elementary unit of reality is concepts.[10]

In the second half of the 20th century, a new approach to Hegel emerged—pioneered by

Dieter Henrich in Germany and Robert Pippin in America[11]—which for a time came to be

known as the "non-metaphysical" interpretation.[12] On this view, Hegel (and Fichte) remained

essentially congruous with Kant in terms of their guiding philosophical questions. Unlike the

"metaphysical" view of these thinkers—so called because of its claim that Fichte and Hegel

sought to return to the pre-critical philosophical metaphysics that Kant had attempted to reject—

the new understanding contended that Fichte and Hegel accepted the essential contours of the

Kantian problem but rejected Kant's solution, which they took to culminate in a thinly veiled

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[9] See, for instance, recent iterations of this view in Michael Theunissen, *Hegels Lehre vom absoluten Geist als theologisch-politischer Traktat* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1970); and Cyril O'Regan, *The Heterodox Hegel* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994).

[10] For an early understanding of Hegel along these lines, see Anton Staudenmeier, *Darstellung und Kritik des hegelschen Systems* (Mainz: Florian Kupferberg, 1844); see also the more recent monistic interpretation in Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

[11] See Dieter Henrich, "Fichtes ursprüngliche Einsicht," in *Subjektivität und Metaphysik. Festschrift für Wolfgang Cramer*, ed. Dieter Henrich and Hans Wagner (Frankfurt am main: Vittorio Klostermann Verlag, 1966), 188–232; and Dieter Henrich, *Hegel im Kontext* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1971). Pippin's first book on Hegel contains what continues to be the standard outline of the philosophical relationship between Kant, Fichte, and Hegel; see Robert B. Pippin, *Hegel's Idealism: The Satisfactions of Self-Consciousness* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

[12] This designation has since been dropped on account of its misleading implication that Hegel makes no claims that could accurately be described as metaphysical. See the overview in James Kreines, "Hegel's Metaphysics: Changing the Debate," *Philosophy Compass* 1, no. 5 (2006): 466–480; and Andrew Buchwalter, "A Critique of Non-Metaphysical Readings of Hegel's Practical Philosophy," in *Hegel and Metaphysics*, ed. Allegra de Laurentiis (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2016), 71–87.

capitulation to the insolubility of the of the relation between mind and world. Far from marking a regression to the theological metaphysics that Kant had surpassed, Fichte and Hegel attempted to make explicit the import of the philosophical rationalism that was implied, but not fully realized, in the three Critiques. It is a central aim of my dissertation to return to the question of religion in the Age of Goethe in light of these recent assessments of German Idealism. I will say more about this in a moment, but first it is necessary to say something about the reception of Kant, Fichte, and Hegel from standpoint of contemporary theology.

The reception of Idealist thought among theologians varies widely, ranging from an eager readiness to consider the implications of Hegel's logical insights for Christian theology to feminist engagements of Hegelian intersubjectivity.[13] My topic is limited to the implications of Idealism for the notion of divine revelation, so here I only want to address what I take to be the *wrong* way of conceiving the relation between revelation and 18th-century philosophy. The approach that I have in mind claims that the developments of this period rely on a strawman version of Christianity, resulting largely from an ignorance of a robust notion of revelation. This view appears in countless variations but is especially prominent among Catholic theological critics of the 18th-century rejection of divine revelation. Consider, for instance, the following conclusion of a recent study of Lessing, Kant, and Fichte:

> [T]hese three thinkers have a flawed understanding of revelation itself. Despite their opposition to contemporary theological trends, they retain a model of revelation normally associated with Protestant and Catholic scholasticism, wherein revelation is primarily understood as doctrine or a set of propositional truths. […] Unfortunately, the theologians against whom the above thinkers reacted misrepresented Christianity so profoundly that they opened the door for

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[13] For the former, see Thomas A. Lewis, "Overcoming a Stumbling Block: A Nontraditional Hegel for Religious Studies," *Journal of Religion* 95, no. 2 (2015): 198–212; for an overview of the latter, see Sari Roman-Lagerspetz, "Recognition in Feminist Philosophy of Religion," *Open Theology* 2 (2016): 960–977.

Enlightenment thinkers to undermine doctrines that Christian theologians purported to defend.[14]

On this reading, the Idealist rejection of divine revelation resulted from the fact that these thinkers were misled by an ultimately incoherent model of revelation which had achieved prominence in the 17th and early 18th centuries. The implication would be that Kant, Fichte, and Hegel never broached the substantive issues involved in the concept of revelation, so their discussions of religion do not produce any meaningful criticisms of this fundamental theological notion. At best, these thinkers serve as a cautionary tale, providing us with a vivid picture of how religious thought becomes incapacitated when it loses sight of its distinction from philosophy. The religious controversies of the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment periods, that is, do little more than indicate the dimensions of the Christian tradition that are apt to be overlooked in a modern philosophical context.

Versions of this evaluation of the 18th-century—i.e., Enlightenment critics of religion and their successors were the product of collective ignorance or forgetting, usually resulting from an earlier philosophical or theological misstep—have been defended in many versions over the past decades.[15] It is this view that my dissertation seeks to reject. If I had to summarize the philosophical thesis of this dissertation in one sentence, it would be this: the Idealist rejection of divine revelation *was a deliberate and principled philosophical conclusion that followed from a sustained engagement of what Kant and his successors had <u>accurately</u> identified as the*

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[14] Grant Kaplan, *Answering the Enlightenment: The Catholic Recovery of Historical Revelation* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2006), 53.

[15] Recent prominent proponents of some version of this view include Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984); Louis Dupré, *Passage to Modernity: An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); Thomas Pfau, *Minding the Modern: Human Agency, Intellectual Traditions, and Responsible Knowledge* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013); and Cyril O'Regan, *The Anatomy of Misremembering: Von Balthasar's Response to Philosophical Modernity, Volume I: Hegel* (Chestnut Ridge, N.Y: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2014).

fundamental issues at stake in this notion. This is because the guiding Idealist notion of a self-articulating, autonomous reason leads directly to an engagement with the foundational presupposition of revelation: that there is a constitutive element of human rationality that eludes conceptual articulation. And, to anticipate, it is with respect to the autonomy of reason that Goethe, too, parts ways with his Idealist contemporaries. It is in light of this connection between divine revelation and what I shall call rational finitude that the uniquely Goethean position within the post-Kantian philosophical constellation comes fully into view.

In a word, the unity of the philosophical, religious, and aesthetic developments during the period 1770–1830 only comes fully to light when viewed with respect to debates on the concept of divine revelation. Nevertheless, the connection between religion and philosophy during this period is not written on the surface of the major texts. To solicit the animating religious issues, Part I of my dissertation is devoted to outlining the salient epistemological issues in the concept of revelation. Chapter One considers the logical presuppositions of the notion of divine revelation in reference to von Balthasar's discussions in *The Glory of the Lord* and *Theo-Logic*. Following von Balthasar's lead, I argue that the characteristic understanding of this concept in the 17th and 18th centuries, according to which our acceptance of an ostensible revelation is identical with our ability to verify the historical facticity of its founding event, misconceives the nature of truth required by the notion of revelation. That is, we do not say that the claims of revelation are "true" because we have determined that they satisfy an antecedent rational standard already in our possession. Instead, if an event of divine revelation is to count as revelation at all, then it must be self-authorizing, furnishing its own evidence and criterion of truth. Chapter Two extends this discussion of the conceptual requirements of revelation by examining the implications of this notion of revelation for human reason in general. In addition

to continuing the dialogue with von Balthasar, this chapter engages Thomas Aquinas' *Summa theologiae* and Erich Przywara's *Analogia Entis* to demonstrate that the human intellect can only be capable of receiving revelation if it is conceived as radically finite, or incapable of furnishing a complete account of its own conditions of possibility.

Part II of my dissertation will turn to the Age of Goethe. Chapter Three will begin by deploying the conceptual framework of Chapters One and Two to reconstruct the development, or rather deconstruction, of the concept of revelation in the preparatory phase of German Idealism. This analysis is centered on a contrast between the religious thought of Enlightenment thinker Hermann Samuel Reimarus, on the one hand, and Immanuel Kant's Copernican revolution in thought and its consequences, on the other. By analyzing this contrast through the lens of the theoretical apparatus developed in my first two chapters, I argue here that Kant's central innovation, the thought that pure reason is capable of giving an account of its own possibility, represents a shift toward the exclusion of the very possibility of revealed religion by denying the coherence of the epistemological categories that revelation presumes. In its radicality, this thought is unprecedented in even the most extreme Enlightenment critiques of Christianity, and thus marks the philosophical threshold leading to the disqualification of revelation as an even logically consistent category. The chapter then turns to G.W.F. Hegel's Idealist concept of Absolute Knowledge as the consistent development of Kant's epistemological commitments. My contention is that the Hegelian transformation of Kant's thought demonstrates the full extent to which the Kantian program rejects the model of reason presumed by revelation. With Hegel, the rejection of the possibility of divine revelation implicit in the *Critique of Pure Reason* becomes explicit. This chapter also considers Fichte's *Attempt at a Critique of All*

Revelation, a text that brings out the contradiction between Idealism and revelation with great polemical force.

In Chapter Four I turn to Goethe. The case to be made here is that Goethe's conception of human thought, in contrast to that of his Idealist counterparts, approximates the finite model of rationality required by revelation. This chapter will trace Goethe's thematization of the category of finitude as it plays out in two phases of his thought. In his early (pre-1789) poetic work, Goethe's primary concerns in this area are the ethical and religious ramifications of human finitude. Through close readings of the 1783 poem "Das Göttliche" and the 1786 drama *Iphigenie auf Taurs*, the first part of this chapter will explore Goethe's anxiety that our notion of the divine tends to reflect an already reductive concept of the human. The second phase of Goethe's reflection on finitude is developed in his scientific writings. There, he develops a conception of human reason that brings him into contact with the epistemological concerns of the earlier chapters. Approaching this material from the standpoint of theology makes it possible to show that Goethe's theorization of the revelation of nature in his *Farbenlehre* and in his scientific work more generally constitutes a substantive alternative to the views of his philosophical contemporaries. The aim of this chapter is not only to illuminate Goethe's position within the history of religious thought, but also to highlight a suite of substantive philosophical and theological issues that emerge in Goethe's reflection on the concepts of revelation and finitude. The fact that these notions figure so prominently in his thought is especially significant given that Goethe is no Christian in any traditional sense of that term. Goethe may have rejected the specific form of rationalism at the core of the Idealist project in a way that parallels essential aspects of the Christian critique of Idealism, but these parallels were clearly not sufficient to bring him any closer to becoming a Christian. This fact is significant because it exemplifies a

central quality of human finitude: it is inherently ambiguous. Denying the autonomy of reason

does not produce a particular philosophical position; it opens up a range of interpretive

possibilities for understanding just what such finitude consists in. It is in this interpretive

moment that Goethe's conceptions fundamentally diverge from those of Christian theology. In

this respect, Goethe can serve as a case study in the application of philosophical hermeneutics to

our finite condition.[16]

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[16] Or, to speak again with von Balthasar, Goethe serves as a case study in the exercise of "pure" philosophy detached from the theological commitments that, for the Christian inform even the most rigorously philosophical argument. Here is von Balthasar's description of how theological commitments can inform a philosophical investigation even when they are made the object of an explicit appeal: "Le *donum* de la grâce enrichit et libère le *datum* (la nature), de manière que celle-ci soit habilitée à une pensée clairvoyante qui, dans le domaine de la nature créée, du monde en général et du monde en ses particularités, découvre des lois qui, quoique purement naturelles, sont cependant entièrement fermées à la pensée non habitée par la grâce. Ce n'est qu'avec hésitation qu'on parlera ici au sens strict de 'philosophie chrétienne,' puisque la lumière de la grâce ne tombe pas uniquement de la doctrine chrétienne connue, mais d'une lumière qui s'étend assurément en dehors de l'espace historique de la révélation," Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Regagner une philosophie à partir de la théologie," in *Pour une philosophie chrétienne: philosophie et théologie*, (Paris: Lethielleux; Namur: Culture et Verité, 1983), 175–187, here 183.

Aber wenn eine [Offenbarung] sein kann, und eine sein muß, und die rechte einmal ausfündig gemacht worden: so muß es der Vernunft eher noch ein Beweis mehr für die Wahrheit derselben, als ein Einwurf darwider sein, wenn sie Dinge darin findet, die ihren Begriff übersteigen.[1]

Chapter 1: The Concept of Revelation

The thesis of *Schau der Gestalt*, the first volume of Hans Urs von Balthasar's *Herrlichkeit. Eine theologische Ästhetik*, appears in the opening pages of the book's introduction: "Und von hier aus muss das Oberste gesichtet werden: die Gestalt der göttlichen Offenbarung in der Heilsgeschichte auf Christus hin und von ihm her."[2] Von Balthasar takes this formulation to comprise several claims: knowledge of God does not emerge from the native resources of reason, but from the interpretation of a historical event; the correct understanding of this one-time empirical occurrence can *adequately* reveal God *as* God; this adequacy can be achieved *only* through the hermeneutic key of the life of Christ; and, finally, all theological claims are inseparable from one another, making up a single continuous *Gestalt*, or form, of divine revelation that secures the legitimacy of all theological thinking. That is, we are somehow failing to do theology, getting it wrong, if we attempt to formulate a theological position from any point of departure other than this historical-christological Gestalt through which revelation makes itself known.[3]

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[1] Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Werke und Briefe in 12 Bänden*, ed. Wilfried Barner (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1985-2003), vol. 8, 316.

[2] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit. Eine Theologische Ästhetik. Band I: Schau der Gestalt* (Trier: Johannes Verlag Einsiedeln, 1961), 26.

[3] For a general survey of von Balthasar's oeuvre, see Elio Guerriero, *Hans Urs von Balthasar. Eine Monographie*, trans. Carl Franz Müller (Freiburg: Johannes Verlag Einsiedeln, 1993); on *Herrlichkeit* as a whole, see Aidan Nichols, *The Word Has Been Abroad: A Guide through Balthasar's Aesthetics* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1998). For more systematic reconstructions of von Balthasar's thought, see Edward T. Oakes, *Pattern of Redemption: The Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (New York: Continuum, 1994) and Raymond Gawronksi, *Word and Silence: Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Spiritual Encounter between East and West* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996).

In this chapter, I want to draw attention to several elements of von Balthasar's discussion

of this claim to bring into view the epistemological structure presumed by the concept of

revelation.[4] Following von Balthasar, I want to take as my point of departure two apparently

incompatible commitments that the concept of revelation apparently presumes. Consider the

contrasting qualities captured by the following formulations:

> [D]as erste ist..., dass hier echte, "lesbare" Gestalt und nicht bloss ein Zeichen oder eine Anhäufung von Zeichen steht...Jesus bildet vor dem Beschauer eine solche Figur, dass sie als Figur überhaupt nur "gelesen" werden kann, wenn das Erscheinungshafte an ihm als das Emportauchen der persönlichen (dreieinigen) göttlichen Tiefe—soll man nun sagen: "gesehen" oder "geglaubt" wird? Vorläufig gesprochen: so wie eine Gestalt der Natur, zum Beispiel eine Blume, nur dann als das gesehen wird, als was sie sich gibt, wenn sie als Erscheinung einer bestimmten Lebenstiefe gesichtet und "empfangen" wird, so wird die Gestalt Jesu nur dann als das gesehen, als was sie sich gibt, wenn sie als die Erscheinung einer göttlichen, alle Weltnatur übersteigenden Tiefe aufgefasst und entgegengenommen wird, wozu der erblickende Mensch sachgemäss nur durch die Gnade Gottes, das heisst durch eine Anteilnahme an dieser gleichen Tiefe ermächtigt werden kann, die ihn der völlig neuen Dimension des Gestaltphänomens, das Gott und Welt in sich begreift, proportioniert.[5]

> Um ein solches Gebäude zu tragen, muss das Fundament von unüberwindlicher Stärke sein. Es kann auf keinen Fall so beschaffen sein, dass auf ihm nur Wahrscheinlichkeiten gebaut werden können, es muss Evidenz bieten. Und zwar nicht subjektive Evidenz, sondern objektive.[6]

The first passage describes revelation's quality of *self*-authorization. The fact that whatever it

seeks to convey is "true" derives exclusively from qualities internal to the event itself, so that the

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[4] I employ the term revelation only in the minimal functional sense that will be described below. It is well known that in the term itself has only recently in the history of Christianity come to play the foundational role familiar from contemporary theology. For the historical emergence of the concept of revelation as it is currently employed, see Avery Dulles, *Models of Revelation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992) and Max Seckler, "Der Begriff der Offenbarung," in *Handbuch der Fundamentaltheologie*, ed. Walter Kern, Hermann Josef Pottmeyer, and Max Seckler (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1985-1988), 2:60-83.

[5] *Herrlichkeit I*, 146.

[6] *Herrlichkeit I*, 446. See also von Balthasar's formulation of the issue in Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theologik. Band II: Wahrheit Gottes* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1985), 78-79: "Die Logik der Kreatur ist der Logik Gottes nicht fremd; man könnte sie einem Dialekt vergleichen, dessen Reinsprache bei Gott gesprochen wird; aber das Gleichnis hinkt, weil Jesus in den weltlichen Bildern und Gleichnissen das göttliche Urbild aufleuchten lassen kann…Jesus ist keine verbildete, sondern die reine Wahrheit, weil er in der weltlichen Gestalt die adäquate Auslegung Gottes des Vaters gibt."

truth of revelation cannot be deduced or proved by comparing some putative divine content with an external criterion of admissibility. We know that revelation is true because it tells us so.[7] And yet—this is the characteristic described in the second passage—this self-authorizing is supposed to still count as self-*authorization*: divine self-disclosure is supposed to result in something we could legitimately call *knowledge*. The self-authorizing character of revelation should not be taken to mean that its truth simply impinges on us such that the category of truth would not apply to it to begin with, whether by coercing us into a brute state of belief or by presenting us with a phenomenon of a completely disparate epistemic quality.[8] On von Balthasar's view, we *know* revelation. This means that, even though revelation must furnish its own verification, this internal verification still needs to count as *evidence*; it must do some work in warranting the *truth* of the revelation, its rationality. Failing this, revelation would lack any recognizable quality that would warrant us in describing our relationship to it as one of knowledge.

This chapter will follow von Balthasar's lead to bring into view the essential characteristics that make up the concept of revelation. The first section will consider just why it is that the two qualities described above are required by considerations internal to the notion of divine self-manifestation. I will then turn to von Balthasar's claim that these two requirements can be satisfied only if we conceive of revelation by analogy with the kind of knowledge that results from aesthetic perception, rather than discursive reflection. The third and final section will address von Balthasar's most ambitious claim, the claim that only Christian revelation is capable of meeting the paradoxical demands that make up an adequate concept of revelation.

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[7] Cf. Romano Guardini's formulation: "Der erste Satz jeder Lehre von der Offenbarung lautet: Was diese ist, kann nur sie selbst sagen. Sie bildet keine Stufe in der Folge der natürlichen Daseinserschließungen, sondern kommt aus dem reinen, göttlichen Anfang," Romano Guardini, *Die Offenbarung. Ihr Wesen und ihre Formen* (Würzburg: Werkbund-Verlag, 1940), 1.

[8] Trying to claim that such unintelligibility could itself be taken as the evidence for the truth of revelation doesn't help matters, because it would deprive us of any grasp we have on the putative revelation to begin with. There would no longer be any grounds to decide between one absurdity over another. Cf. *Herrlichkeit I*, 134.

Before getting into the issue itself, however, some words are necessary regarding the nature of the discussion offered here. When I refer to "essential" features of revelation, or its "presuppositions," I am trying to suggest that the qualities in question are commitments without which the concept of revelation would be internally inconsistent. They are required by the minimal notion expressed in the thought of divine revelation, by which we mean something like: "dass Gott, der Grund des Seins selbst, sich in positiv-geschichtlicher, zeit-räumlicher Gestalt einmalig offenbart."[9] Before any theoretical reflection on the concept, the idea behind the expression "revelation" seems to be that that God intervenes in our historical world and gives us some kind of knowledge (who he is, how he wants us to act, the nature of the world, or whatever), knowledge that we could only acquire through this kind of divine communication. By following von Balthasar's discussion of revelation, I want to draw out the commitments that are necessary for revelation to do what it says it does in this pre-reflective grasp of the concept.

I am considering, in other words, the requirements for the concept of revelation to be self-coherent. If we reject one or several of these elements, we will also be implicitly rejecting the possibility of revelation. We may still employ this term, but it becomes incapable of expressing the thought that the term intuitively seeks to convey. We cannot simultaneously hold onto the concept of divine revelation and deny that it exhibits this structure of self-authorization along with whatever further conditions this structure presumes in turn. This leaves open the question of whether there actually *is* some particular event of revelation that does exhibit these features, or, for that matter, arguing that the presuppositions of revelation that I hope to draw out are themselves rationally defensible. For the purposes of this chapter, the concept of revelation is entertained solely as a hypothesis without affirming or denying either the reality corresponding

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[9] *Herrlichkeit I*, 139.

to this hypothesis or evaluating the viability of its antecedent commitments. The discussion only means to draw out what these commitments are in the first place.

It will obviously be necessary to consider just what further commitments are entailed by the presuppositions of revelation outlined here and doing so will be the task of the next chapter. And, looking forward, it is by contesting the conception of human rationality necessary for the possibility of revelation that the strand I am tracing in the Age of Goethe will *eo ipso* disqualify the notion of revelation.

But this is all getting ahead of ourselves, and it still remains to be seen just what account of revelation a "theological aesthetics" produces. And we still have to understand von Balthasar's claim that the shortcomings of any alternative, "non-aesthetic" account of revelation are so extensive that any such approach, consistently thought through, ultimately undermines the notion of revelation itself—either by reducing it to the immanent requirements of the subjects to whom the revelation is intended, or by banishing the divine to the inaccessible realm of the unintelligible, available only to mystical immediacy. All such failures, von Balthasar claims stem from a shared misunderstanding of the relationship between the content of revelation and its external form.

Revelation and Evidence

Von Balthasar's discussion of Revelation in *Schau der Gestalt* is divided into two parts: "Die subjektive Evidenz," which considers the perception of and assent to revelation, and "Die objektive Evidenz," which examines revelation from the standpoint of its content, inquiring just what would be required of the event itself in order for it to qualify as a divine self-communication.[10] Von Balthasar's conception of revelation as *Gestalt* emerges in the first part as

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[10] This division requires immediate qualification: the logical distinction between the subjective conditions of the act of faith and the nature of its object in no way entails that the former can be accounted for independently of latter, as

the only adequate account that could explain how a subject could recognize and assent to the divinity of an event of revelation. Attempting to account for how a subject could explain why such a phenomenon should be recognized as divine brings into view the unique epistemological situation involved in the concept of revelation.

The problem here could be stated in the following way: even if there were some historical occurrence brought about by God to communicate something to us, the fact of this occurrence alone would not suffice *for us* to recognize it as revelation.[11] This is because, as a historical event, it would necessarily possess a historical finite character, even if of an extraordinary sort. It seems that, from our perspective at least, what we would perceive in such a phenomenon would exclusively consist of its finite characteristics. We would understand the phenomenon itself as a unique historical event. This means that the success of the revelation, its ability to convey something new to us about God, would depend on our ability to recognize that this historical event is so incomparably singular that it could only be brought about by God. We would have to conclude that no immanent, finite explanation could ever account for what has taken place. What we would *know* in such a case would be a series of distinctive finite events, from which we would then *infer* their divine origin, and on the basis of this inference we would *interpret* the events as providing us with new information about the divine. There remains an inferential gap between historical event and ostensible divine source that we would somehow have to bridge for revelation to accomplish what it sets out to do. Here is where the problems start to emerge in describing a divine intervention in the finite historical world.

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if there were an account of the conditions of the possibility of any revelation whatsoever. Central to Balthasar's position is the claim that no account of the subjective act of faith could ever be derived apart from concrete reference to the specific content of revelation, as we shall see below. On the status of the first part of *Herrlichkeit I* as a provisional abstraction, see the opening discussion of "Die objektive Evidenz" (*Herrlichkeit I*, 413-417). The tenuous nature of the kind of investigation I offer in this chapter will be the central topic of the following chapter.

[11] See von Balthasar's discussion of Thomas on this issue, *Herrlichkeit I*, 154-155.

On this account, an intra-historical revelation would amount to the use of a finite

historical context on the part of God as a medium for the disclosure of his divinity. This event

would perhaps be accompanied by various signs and extraordinary deeds meant to serve as

evidence for the veracity of the revelation. No matter how unique the event is, however, any

miracles or exceptional signs that accompany a putative revelation would themselves possess a

historical, finite character. Even if they are unrepeatable, unique events, considered on their own

they remain quantitatively intensified iterations of quotidian phenomena.

And herein lies the first difficulty of a concept of revelation which claims that a rational

inference mediates our access to the God behind the historical event. Even if the uniqueness of

the event and its inability to be explained by other means might provide us with some reason to

entertain the prospect of a divine origin, all we really know in such a case reduces to a particular

historical state of affairs for which we have produced the best explanation currently available to

us: "damit wird das göttliche Zeugnis zu einem (ausgezeichneten) Fall unter anderen; die

göttliche Qualität springt nicht heraus: weder auf der Seite der Einsicht oder Schau, noch auf der

des Glaubens."[12] The problem is that any new information about God we might acquire would

only be held at the level of hypothesis, as the best account we *currently* have for explaining an

extraordinary finite phenomenon. And herein lies the difficulty: the finite events that are

supposed to require explanation by divine origin cannot retroactively shed their finite character,

and our claims about God that are meant to explain the empirical occurrence exhibit the same

intrinsically revisable quality that characterizes any kind of empirical account. As Jean-Luc

Marion characterizes this mode of explanation, "The positive certainty of a scientific assertion

about an object remains finite, and above all because the thought that constitutes it remains

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[12] *Herrlichkeit I*, 140.

finite. The point here is...to emphasize, or at least admit, that this certainty remains inevitably provisional, revisable, in a sense radically contingent."[13] Thus, this account of revelation finds itself liable to the epistemological instabilities that characterize *all* knowledge of finite empirical events, knowledge which is always liable to developments such as: the realization that our initial interpretation of the data was incorrect; the emergence of new data that requires modifying our previous interpretation, or contriving a new one altogether; not to mention the difficulties involved in subsequent transmission of the revelation to individuals not present at the event itself.

In other words, even assuming that we could correctly interpret the content that a putative revelation presents to us,[14] our assent to the claims of revelation could only ever be conditional, remaining open to the possibility of a new, equally extraordinary event that could bring us to modify or even contradict our current belief. The instability in this kind of formulation is augmented exponentially when it subsequently takes the form of, "On the basis of another's testimony…" What was meant to be a unique event of divine self-disclosure warranting new knowledge of God has degenerated to a fragile hermeneutic framework so loaded with qualifications and caveats that it becomes increasingly unclear why we should refer to a relationship to this kind of phenomenon as one of "knowledge."[15] If this is our only resource for

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[13] Jean-Luc Marion, *Negative Certainties*, trans. Stephen E. Lewis (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 4.

[14] And it is unlikely that we could come to such a successful interpretation of the event itself. Peter Winch brings this point out forcefully: "...as far as getting from a merely contingent matter of fact to a religious truth is concerned, it seems to me that the same difficulties are involved whether one's starting point be an historical report or a personally witnessed event. It seems clear that the 'spirit and power' of which Lessing writes cannot be identified with the extraordinariness of a miraculous event or a fulfilled prophecy. Where one observer may be filled with religious awe, another may murmur 'Trickery!' or 'Black magic!'" Peter Winch, "Lessing and the Resurrection," in *The Possibilities of Sense*, ed. John H. Whittaker (Handmills and New York: Palgrave, 2002), 182-203, here 188. See also the discussion in Louis Dupré, *The Enlightenment and the Intellectual Foundations of Modern Culture* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2004), 264f.

[15] See also Georg Simmel's characterization of modern religious life as determined by an increasingly self-conscious awareness of the contradiction in the conditional adoption of religious claims, "Das Problem der religiösen Lage," in *Aufsätze und Abhandlungen, 1909-1918: Band I*, ed. Rüdiger Kramme and Angela Rammstedt, vol. 12 of

approaching revelation, then it would be impossible for event of revelation to accomplish what its concept implies.

Von Balthasar believes that the problem with any model of this sort is that it rests on illegitimate presuppositions about just what revelation must consist in, given that it purports to convey something divine and eternal in a historical finite mode. Specifically, he thinks that what this approach overlooks in its consideration of revelation is the possibility that the historical, finite elements in revelation are *themselves* the content of the manifestation of the divine. The mistaken commitment shared by the approaches that von Balthasar is criticizing is the belief that the facts and events that make up the historical moment of divine revelation can serve only as evidence for the truth of a message or doctrine for which these events stand as signs. As von Balthasar summarizes the variations on this model:

> Beide pflegen die historischen Offenbarungstatsachen als "Zeichen" zu benennen; sie nehmen sie als "Hinweise"—allerdings genügend tragfähige—auf etwas Geheimnisvolles, das dahinterliegt und geglaubt werden muss. Denn wäre es in den Zeichen selbst an sich sichtbar, so wäre der Glaube aufgehoben.[16]

The assumption von Balthasar wants to reject is that the historical event that manifests God is merely an external covering for a content that comprises the true essence of revelation. According to this assumption, the specific shape that this content takes on is unimportant – any vessel will do, as long as it suffices to relay the essentials of the message to be revealed. The result is a signs model of revelation: it is the content contained within the finite signs of revelation that make up the object of belief in divine revelation.

Before turning to why von Balthasar thinks that such an understanding of revelation is self-undermining, I want to draw attention to the rational anxiety inherent in the concept of

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Gesamtausgabe, ed. Uta Kösser, Hans-Martin Kruckis, and Otthein Rammstedt (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2001), 148-161.
[16] *Herrlichkeit I*, 143.

revelation that the signs model responds to and to which we will have to return later. The

difficulty lies in the fact that the thought of historical revelation attempts to bring into contact

two apparently divergent spheres, in that it involves the appearance of the infinite, non-historical,

unseen God within the finite, historical, material world. Any translation of the former into the

latter, however, would have to involve construing the infinite in terms of the finite:

> ...wie ist überhaupt göttliche, unendliche Wahrheit in geschöpfliche, endliche
> übersetzbar? Die Analogia Entis verbeitet, über beiden ein einendes Drittes
> anzusetzen; kein Begriff kann sich über Gott erheben. So bleibt das Problem ein
> solches zwischen Gott und Welt: kann Gott sich *als* Gott der Welt verständlich
> machen, ohne seines göttlichen Charakters verlustig zu gehen,...sich dieser *als* Gott
> offenbaren, ohne daß sich die Menschen dabei einen götzenhaften Begriff von ihm
> schmieden?[17]

Whatever appears in an historical event of revelation, so the story goes, is itself historical, that is,

not the invisible God: regardless of what shows up in a historical revelation, it will necessarily be

finite, and therefore not God.[18] God *can't* appear as a finite being; this would just mean that God

does not appear at all: "...if intuition implies space and time, then there cannot be intuition of

God. Or, more radically, there *must* not be any such intuition, if God is ever to be considered."[19]

In other words, the concern is that the very concept of God prohibits his appearance in the

empirical world. In order for such a manifestation to count as an appearance *of God*, he would

have to appear *as* God (infinite, invisible, and so forth), and this is what seems to be precluded

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[17] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theologik. Band I: Wahrheit der Welt* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1985), xvii; see also the formulation of the aporia in *Theologik II*: "Ein bis zu Ende in endlichen Worten (und Taten!) aussagbarer Gott wäre nicht Gott mehr, sondern ein Götze. Aber auch ein Gott, der sich selbst nicht bis an dieses Ende und Äußerste hingeben wollte, sondern ein Stück seiner selbst für sich behielte und uns vorenthielte, wäre wiederum nicht unser Gott mehr, sondern ein Götze," *Theologik II*, 254.

[18] See Guardini's formulation: "Kann in göttlichen Dingen überhaupt eine bestimmte Verkündung gelten? Gott ist doch der Unendliche, alle Maßstäbe Übersteigende - ist es möglich, ihn auf eine bestimmte Lehre und Lebensregel feszulegen [sic]?"Romano Guardini, "Die Offenbarung und die Endlichkeit," in *Unterscheidung des Christlichen.Band 2: Aus dem Bereich der Theologie*, ed. Franz Henrich, 3rd ed. (Mainz: Matthias-Grünewald-Verlag; Paderborn: Verlag Ferdinand Schöningh, 1994), 141-154, here 141-142.

[19] Jean-Luc Marion, *Negative Certainties*, 53.

by the finite material conditions in which such an appearance would have to take place.[20] What von Balthasar characterizes as the sign theory of revelation emerges in implicit response to this apparently contradictory notion of divine self-manifestation. This account of revelation attempts to resolve the aporia of the infinite appearing in the finite by simply denying it: there is no appearance of the infinite in revelation.

Adopting the signs account of revelation is motivated by a further concern native to the concept of revelation that has to do with the quality our epistemic relation to the message of revelation. As von Balthasar indicates in the passage cited above, the position is partially motivated by the fact that we intuitively describe our relation to revelation as one of faith, and the signs model seeks to preserve this characterization. The concern is that the actual appearance of the infinite would suspend the notion of faith because such a complete manifestation would leave no room for doubt; our admission of the truth of revelation would be the result of compulsion, rather than belief. The advantage of assuming that we do not see God in historical revelation, but only finite historical phenomena that point to him, is that this assumption responds to and secures this intuition that belief is central to the concept of revelation. It does so by claiming that the real point of revelation is the message or content *behind* the signifying historical events. *This* is the object of faith, not the event itself, which is what requires that our relation to revelation be one of faith, rather than certainty.

The point here is that the sign-content description of revelation emerges in order to secure legitimate conceptual requirements native to the concept of revelation, and hence helps to bring into view the notion's salient qualities. Given the correct assumptions about revelation that form

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[20] Cf. Magnus Striet, "Wahrnehmung der Offenbarungsgestalt,", 66: "Keineswegs geht es somit um ein nur vages Herantasten an die unbegreiflich bleibende Wahrheit Gottes, sondern um deren wirkliches Verstehen in ihrer Unbegreiflichkeit, ihrer bleibenden Geheimnishaftigkeit."

the basis of such an account, why does von Balthasar take such issue with this solution and insist on reintroducing the problem of revelation in the aporetic form of the appearance of the infinite in the finite? For one thing, if we admit that God cannot appear in the historical world, we will inherit all of the difficulties involved in retroactively inferring an event's divine origin, and it is difficult to see how these difficulties could be surmounted. The real problem, however, is prior to the issues involved in the verification of the truth of revelation. The problem is not merely that of an evidentiary standard that is cannot be met. Rather, von Balthasar claims even approaching revelation in terms of satisfying a rational standard excludes the notion of revelation altogether, before we even consider whether or not it can be satisfied. If we approach revelation in this way, we will either end up with a rationalism that leaves no room for anything meaningful to be revealed, or we will be forced to say that revelation is completely distinct from reason, inscrutable to any kind of rational investigation at all.

The rationalist strain of the sign account of revelation comes into view when we assume for the sake of argument that we *could* succeed in understanding the meaning of revelation and establishing its veracity. As it turns out, even if we could respond to all of the rational objections against inferring the divinity of an event of revelation, we would not be any closer to a divine self-disclosure. [21] The problem goes deeper than the apparent inability of any single event to fulfill our rational requirements: for von Balthasar, if we can only determine the truth of revelation by appealing to our own standards of intelligibility, then the possibility of revelation is precluded long before we begin to wonder whether a given event satisfies the necessary criteria

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[21] This entails that it is impossible to respond to the objection that there is not enough evidence for the truth of revelation by simply gathering more evidence. Regardless of how much or how little evidence results from such an endeavor, assuming that it is external evidence that warrants the truth of revelation already concedes too much ground to the skeptic to sustain a coherent notion of revelation. This is why the strategy of attempting to meet the evidence objection head on, rather than questioning its terms, inevitably weakens the concept of revelation that it aims to defend, even if it might succeed in local cases. This will be a central topic in chapter three.

we have posited for divine manifestation. The idea is that the sort of God that is revealed on this

account, a God about whom we now possess more knowledge because of its correspondence

with knowledge we already have, would not really amount to God at all. Here is a characteristic

description of the problem:

> Unter dem Einfluss eines modernen rationalistischen Wissenschaftsbegriffs rückte
> die Frage immer mehr aus ihrer eigenen Mitte –"wie tritt Gottes Offenbarung in der
> Geschichte vor den Menschen auf? Wie wird sie wahrgenommen?"—immer mehr
> an den Rand und lautet dann: "hier ist ein Mann aufgetreten, der behauptet, Gott zu
> sein, und auf Grund dieser Behauptung verlangt, man müsse ihm viele der Vernunft
> unverifizierbare Wahrheiten glauben: wie lässt sich sein autoritärer Anspruch in
> einer die Vernunft befriedigenden Weise begründen?" Wer so fragt, hat eigentlich
> schon verloren, er gerät in das unauflösliche Dilemma, entweder auf Grund
> hinreichender Vernunftgewissheit zu glauben, dann glaubt er aber nicht auf Grund
> der göttlichen Autorität, und sein Glaube ist kein christlicher Glaube, - oder, um
> einen sochen Glauben zu leisten, auf die Vernunftgewissheit zu verzichten und auf
> blosse Wahrscheinlichkeit hin zu glauben, dann ist sein Glaube nicht wirklich
> vernünftig.[22]

In the theological account that von Balthasar is criticizing, the problem of revelation becomes

one of furnishing sufficient grounds for admitting the truth of a series of claims that require

verification. Von Balthasar's concern is that this notion of revelation implicitly limits God's

capacity to reveal himself to constraints imposed by human rationality. The implicit assumption

of any such model is that our basic approach to revelation consists in comparing it to some

rational standard that we already possess, whether it be the inferences called for to explain the

uniqueness of an event or the singular character of the message that revelation is supposed to

convey.[23] Reason, that is, would investigate a putative case of revelation and ratify its truth by

confirming that the event in question fulfills our standards of evidence.

The point that von Balthasar is getting at in passages like the one just cited is that, once

we think that it is incumbent upon human reason to establish the truth of revelation, we have

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[22] *Herrlichkeit I*, 166.
[23] These are the criteria that would be decisive in the respective models of revelation of Hume and Locke.

implicitly conceived of it as an event that is coextensive with the domain of natural intelligibility.

With this picture of revelation, the question we have been asking so far—of whether or not there

is sufficient evidence to verify the truth of revelation—loses its meaning before it is even asked.

Such a model saddles us with a rationalism that subordinates God to the demands of reason. We

believe the message of revelation only because reason demands it, not because God ratifies it.

Prior to determining *whether* sufficient external evidence can be procured to assert the truth of a

revelatory event, assuming that this is the kind of question we should be asking to begin with

already commits us to a set of rationalist presuppositions that undermine the concept of

revelation we set out to explain.[24] As von Balthasar puts it:

> Das seinshafte Übergewicht Gottes im Herzen und Geist des Menschen verhindert
> es, dass der Glaube sich auf Grund eines desiderium naturale intellectus, eines
> Postulats der Vernunft definiert, wodurch dann doch das Göttliche am
> Menschlichen "gemessen" würde (vgl. 2a 2ae q 7 a2 ad2); nicht wir fordern auf
> Grund unseres Dynamismus die Gnade, diese ist es, die uns anfordert und enteignet.
> Ihr Übergewicht in uns ist das, was uns nötigt, es ist auch das, was Gott in uns die
> absolute Autorität verleiht.[25]

To say that revelation could be justified through a rational deduction is to limit it to our own

standards of truth. But this sort of constrained revelation would be no revelation at all.[26]

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[24] On the inherent inability of any apologetic project that is set up along these lines to achieve what it sets out to do, see Vincent Holzer, "Une contre-apologétique. Du jugement de crédibilité rationelle *suffisante* à l' 'évidence objective' de la Révélation," *Communio: Revue catholique internationale* 39 (2014): 55-71.
[25] *Herrlichkeit I*, 155.
[26] See also the formulation of this problem in *Glaubhaft ist nur Liebe*: "Denn wenn Gottes Zeichen sich weder an der Welt noch am Menschen verifiziert: woran dann? Die Frage ist, wenn man die skizzierte Geschichte ein wenig bedenkt, nicht so traditionell als es dem durchschnittlichen Christenbewußtsein scheint. Es gibt keine 'Unterlegung' eines anderen Textes unter den Text Gottes, durch den er lesbar und verständlich, oder sagen wir, lesbarer und verstämdlicher werden könnte. Er muß und will sich selber auslegen. Wenn er es tut, so ist eines von vornherein sicher: es wird darin nicht stehen, was der Mensch von sich aus—a priori oder a posteriori, leicht oder schwer, immer schon oder durch historische Evolution—über die Welt, über sich selber und über Gott herausgebracht haben könnte," Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Glaubhaft ist nur Liebe* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag Einsiedeln, 1963), 32. As the second sentence of this passage alludes, Balthasar thinks that the threat of losing God through rationalism is not an academic abstraction. His claim is that we employ all kinds of rationalizing strategies in our religious, moral, and social existence, and that yielding to this deep-set inclination is the perennial form of avoiding the way of thinking and living called for by Christian revelation. The theoretical rationalism that emerges at this level of theological speculation is a mirror image of a prior ethical and religious rationalism that characterizes the pedestrian attitude a fallen human race. See von Balthasar's description of faith as the final legitimating ground of all human ethical activity: "Die grundsätzliche Ratifizierung ist der Glaube, der nur dann die Form echten Glaubens hat, wenn er

Regardless of whether we take our verifying grounds to be sufficient or lacking, we have already lost our grasp on the concept of revelation that we set out to investigate in the first place.[27]

The intrinsic failure of the attempt to verify revelation by an external standard leads to the second horn of the dilemma arising from the signs account of revelation. The counter-position is motivated by the failure to describe revelation as the kind of thing that can be rationally demonstrated and overcompensates for this by claiming that the phenomenon of revelation is simply alien to our canons of truth and admissibility.[28] On this explanation, our rational access to revelation stops at a definite boundary, beyond which revelation can only be accessed by faith. The limits of reason can be severe or generous, delineating reason as entirely incommensurable with any dimension revelation (Luther, Barth) or allowing reason to establish a probable but insufficient account of the plausibility of revelation as a kind of initial platform from which the leap of faith can be made (Suárez, and, in a different way, Jacobi). Even in the latter case, the act of faith can only be made on the condition of admitting that the available rational grounds are insufficient to warrant adopting such faith.[29] By contrasting our processes of reason with what happens in faith, this model can only conceive of faith as an exit into a realm opposed to reason, as an emergence out of reason:

> Der Akt des Glaubens hätte also gleichsam zwei Zeiten: die erste innerhalb der natürlich-autonomen Vernunft, die auf Grund ihrer in sich geschlossenen Evidenz darüber befindet, ob es den Gründen der Vernunft entsprechend sei, den Gehorsam des Glaubens zu leisten. Die zweite Zeit bildete dann dieser Akt der Unterwerfung

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apriori unbegrenzt Gott Recht gibt, gegen jedes Besserwissertum seiner eignen Vernunft," *Glaubhaft ist nur Liebe*, 84.

[27] On the themes discussed in this paragraph, see Romano Guardini's lucid opening discussion in Romano Guardini, *Das Wesen des Christentums*, 2nd ed. (Würzburg: Werkbund-Verlag, 1939), 3-7.

[28] Of course, this account also has in its favor the fact that it responds to a dimension of revelation that we have already seen, the thought that faith should play a constitutive role in our attitude toward revelation. There is something in revelation that must be *believed*, cannot be *exhaustively demonstrated*. The anti-rational problems that emerge in the present account follow from the assumption it shares with the rationalist position, that these two modes of knowing are *intrinsically opposed*.

[29] On the impossibility of appealing to probabilistic grounds to provide a rational standing from which to attempt an irrational leap of faith, see the discussion in *Herrlichkeit I*, 445f.

selbst, in welchem die Vernunft, gestützt auf ihre eigene Einsicht, über sich selbst hinaus in den Abgrund der transzendenten Wahrheit Gottes sich stürzte. Aber in einer solchen vernünftigen Rechtfertigung des Glaubensaktes erscheint der erste Schritt als rationalistisch und darum der zweite als irrational.[30]

Whether much or little is conceded to reason's preliminary grasp of revelation, the essential commitment is the same: the judgment that revelation is true cannot be demonstrated rationally and therefore is *outside of* reason. Faith, on this account, is identified with ceasing to assess the phenomenon in terms of its rationality.[31]

Although this new account maintains the transcendence of God that the rationalist model undermines, it does so at the cost of introducing as many problems as it solves. The issue now is determining the status of faith once it is conceived of as having no contact with reason. Whatever experience of God we end up having on this model would take place on a different plane than that of knowledge as a kind of mystical encounter intractable to our attempts to understand or articulate our experience of revelation. If this is the case, however, is difficult to see what means are left for us to say *what* it is we believe in the first place, much less to adjudicate between one candidate revelation and another. If the previous model was incapable of accounting for how revelation could give us knowledge *about God*, this account makes it impossible for us to *know* anything about the revealed God. That is, preventing the rationalist reduction of revelation by declaring it to be a phenomenon that is intractable to reason altogether is equally incompatible with what we set out to describe in the notion of revelation. In either case, the essential thought of revelation, that of a divine self-disclosure that provides us with knowledge of God, becomes untenable.

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[30] *Theologik I*, 296.
[31] This understanding of Christian faith is the center of Martin Luther's theological project.

To recapitulate, attempting to think of revelation as the kind of thing that calls for external justification sets into motion a dialectic that issues in rationalism or fideism, both of which exclude from the outset what the concept of revelation seek to express. Marion formulates the resulting double-bind nicely when he writes:

> Since the two conditions of this speech exercise [i.e. speaking of God] are unambiguously extreme (to experience what cannot be experienced, to express the inexpressible) one can hardly avoid looking for an alternative, when faced with such claims. On the one hand, one could simply challenge all 'negative theology' as a language game that is both impractical (after all, one cannot experience what one cannot experience) and contradictory (one cannot, after all, express what one cannot express)...On the other hand, one could accept 'negative theology' but restrict it to the domain in which it claims its validity, that of the purest and most extreme religious experience, the domain attributed to the 'mystical.' This acceptance would amount to a marginalization, since this domain remains inaccessible to most of us—certainly to most philosophers. Even if admitted in principle, 'mystical theology' would thus remain an unfrequented territory, willingly abandoned by those who attempt to ignore it to those who are willing to lose themselves there, at the risk of irrationality.[32]

Instead of accounting for how God could become manifest to us in a way that transcends the natural capacity of reason, we either (implicitly or explicitly) reduce God to the standards of natural reason or, in response to this explanatory failure, reconceive revelation as an inexpressible phenomenon that we only have access to by an extra-rational act of faith. The result is what von Balthasar calls "ein Widerspruch in sich selbst, nämlich die Aufhebung des Aktes, der gesetzt werden soll."[33] Both options foreclose on the animating thought of revelation:

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[32]Jean-Luc Marion, "What Cannot Be Said: Apophasis and the Discourse of Love," in *The Visible and the Revealed*, trans. Christina M. Gschwandtner, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 101-118, here 102. Marion identifies Derrida as the strongest critic of theology, on the basis of the latter's contention that the kind of apophatic language that would be required for theological claims is unavailable to us. See Jacques Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking," trans. Ken Frieden, in *Languages of the Unsayable: The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory*, ed. Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 3-70; and Marion's response to these criticisms in Jean-Luc Marion, "How to Avoid Speaking of 'Negative Theology'," trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky, in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, ed. John D. Caputo and Michael Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 20-42; and Jean-Luc Marion, "In the Name: How to Avoid Speaking of It," in *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, trans. Robyn Horner and Vincent Berraud (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 128-162.
[33] *Herrlichkeit I*, 135.

knowledge of God (against the antirationalist picture of revelation) that is meaningful and *new* (against the rationalist deconstruction of revelation).[34]

Von Balthasar's point in drawing attention to the logic of this dialectic is to expose the unsustainability of the commitment that sets it into motion: the assumption that what we perceive in revelation is not God, but a finite stand-in for God. As it turns out, it is impossible to maintain a consistent notion of revelation while maintaining this point of departure. That is, if such a coherent concept of revelation is possible, then the aporia of revelation with which we began, the difficulties involved in conceiving the appearance of the infinite in a finite historical form, cannot be domesticated by designating the historical form as a mere pointer to the real infinite beyond it. Any attempt to do so will land us in a thicket of paradoxes and contradictions when we try to account for how such mere signs could map on to the transcendent God to which they are supposed to refer.[35]

The Perception of Revelation

In von Balthasar's diagnosis of this dialectic, the shared assumption that forms the basis of both unsatisfactory positions is that the historical events that make up divine revelation are external trappings that convey a content they themselves are not, and it is the latter we are really after when we speak of revelation. This commitment requires that we decode and interpret the

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[34] *Glaubhaft ist nur Liebe*, 33. See also Erich Przywara's analysis of this dialectic in Erich Przywara, *Religionsphilosophie katholischer Theologie*, in *Religions-philosophische Schriften*, (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1962), 373-511, especially 394-399. Przywara goes so far as to claim that fideism is ultimately predicated upon the same rationalist commitments as its philosophical counterpart: "…der aus der Natur dieses Problems erfolgende Gegensatz von Supranaturalismus und Rationalismus steht im schweren Verdacht, nur Verkleidung einer inneren Dialektik reinen Rationalismus zu sein. D. h. das Wesenhafte von Religion, die reale Verbindung mit Gott, scheint unmöglich," ibid., 399.

[35] Von Balthasar goes to great lengths to show that this error underlies a diverse host of unsustainable theological positions, even those that appear to be mutually exclusive; for example, critical biblical scholarship and Neoplatonic reductionism: "Jesus der Mensch in der Sichtbarkeit ist nicht ein Zeichen, das über sich hinausweist auf einen unsichtbaren 'Christus des Glaubens', mag diese Konzeption nun mehr platonisierend-katholisch oder kritizistisch-protestantisch abgeschattet sein," *Herrlichkeit I*, 420.

historical signs prior to any consideration of the truth of their message. The external form of revelation remains contingent; after we have understood what the finite events mean to communicate, we can leave them behind, or even imagine the same message being conveyed with a different external covering. On von Balthasar's account, once we think of the essence of revelation as an independent nucleus that can be extracted from its external presentation, we are forced to seek an external standard of truth to warrant the truth of the revelation in question, leading to the self-undermining dialectic traced in the preceding section. All of this brings into view why von Balthasar takes as his point of departure an investigation of revelation's status as self-authorizing, according to which the divinity of revelation can be accounted for by appealing to grounds internal to the event itself. His argument is that we can only give such an account of self-authorization if we reject the assumption underlying the inferential sign-model of revelation, the assumption that it is impossible for the infinite God to appear in the finite world.

Recall that the dialectic of the sign account of revelation emerged as an attempt to account for how we could verify the divine origin of revelation, given that all we perceive are contingent, finite, historical events. This, in turn required, us to make some transition from what we perceive in revelation to the infinite divine realm of which it is supposed to give us knowledge. This is ostensibly because God could not appear in the finite world, at least not *as* God, and so such divine appearance could only occur if God were to take on finite, historical properties, qualities whose absence is supposed to be the essential quality of God. Consequently, God would simply be unable to appear in revelation. He could only communicate by translating his infinite qualities to us through the vessel of a unique set of finite events. This is a reasonable enough assumption; and yet, as von Balthasar argues—convincingly, I think—if this assumption

is true, then the notion of revelation becomes a performative impossibility, trapped in the

dialectic we have traced between rationalism and fideism.[36]

The result of all of this is that, in order for the concept of revelation to work, to do what it

claims to do, the divinity of the putative revelation must be internal to the revelation itself, not

something that we conclude on the basis of external criteria. It is impossible to establish

retroactively the divine quality of events whose phenomenal quality is one of finitude.

Revelation itself must provide us with the conditions that allow us to recognize it as divine:

> Das blosse Licht der Vernunft reicht offensichtlich nicht aus, dieses Werk zu
> beleuchten, und man kann unwiderleglich feststellen, dass jeder, der es mit diesem
> Licht zu bewältigen sucht, ihm nicht gerecht wird; das Gotteslicht des Glaubens
> aber *sieht* die Gestalt wie sie ist, und zwar nachweisbar so, dass die Evidenz der
> Richtigkeit der Sache an der Sache selbst und von ihr her aufleuchtet.[37]

That is, even if a revelation must take on finite historical characteristics to appear in the

historical world, we must nevertheless *perceive* these very historical events themselves as divine.

This is the only way that revelation could consistently do what it purports accomplish: establish

meaningful knowledge of God.

Considering the logical presuppositions of the concept of revelation thus brings into view

the following characteristic as essential to its internal coherence: a historical event of revelation

can count as revelation if we are able to perceive it *as* revelation, *as* divine, as the infinite

appearing *in* (and not behind) the finite. Faith then, assent to the authenticity of revelation, does

not consist in a process of ratiocination or inferential reasoning, but in a kind of *seeing* (itself

derivative of what is seen), the perception of the self-evidence that gives itself in revelation:

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[36] Cf. Larry Chapp's formulation: "Thus, the source of our problem is precisely the expectation that 'religion', in order to give us the transhistorical, must give us something that is ahistorical," Larry Chapp, "Revelation," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar*, ed. Edward T. Oakes (Cambridge: Cambridge Univesity Press, 2004), 11-23, here 20.
[37] *Herrlichkeit I*, 165.

"Die Zentrale Frage der sogenannten 'Apologetik' oder 'Fundamentaltheologie' ist somit eine Frage des Gestaltsehens, ein ästhetisches Problem."[38] *Perceiving* the divinity of revelation in its historical manifestation would be the only ground for asserting its authenticity while avoiding the inference model of faith.[39]

At this point, the motivation for developing a "theological aesthetics" becomes clear: perception is introduced in order to respond to the question of revelation's ability to furnish its own evidence and standard of truth, and this will require introducing an altogether new set of aesthetic concepts, thereby shifting the terms of the strictly epistemological problematic we have been examining up to this point.[40] Put another way, von Balthasar's claim is that—at least in the case of revelation—the topic of perception and the topic of evidence *form a single question*, and the aporiai that we have traced in the preceding pages emerge out of a failure to recognize the unity of these two issues:

> ...die Zentrale Evidenzform, an der alles übrige hängt, ist die Wahrnehmung der objektiven Gottesgestalt Jesu Christi, die nicht "geglaubt," sondern "gesehen" wird (auch wenn wir noch so sehr an Christus glauben); an dieser Gestalt leuchtet die objektive Herrlichkeit Gottes auf, sie ist der endgültige Kabôd, der die Stiftshütte der gesamten Schöpfung zu überschatten ausgesandt und berufen ist.[41]

Von Balthasar is proposing that the evidence question—the issue of what could count as answer to the question of *why* we say that a given revelation is true—can be answered if we can address

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[38] *Herrlichkeit I*, 166.
[39] See the helpful discussion of this point in Ilkamarina Kuhr, *Gabe und Gestalt. Theologische Phänomenologie bei Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Regensburg: Verlag Friedrich Pustet, 2012), 242-253.
[40] Cf. the formulation of Magnus Striet: "Dies setzt aber auf Seiten des Menschen die Einsicht voraus, dass er angesichts des Lebenszeugnisses in einer der Gestalt dieses Zeugnisses angemessenen Weise *versteht*, dass ihm in diesem in radikaler geschichtlicher Kontingenz in einer durch ihn unverfügbaren Weise letztgültig Sinn zugesprochen wurde und er wahrhaft bei sich selbst ist, wenn er sich von dieser Liebe beschenken lässt. Dies aufzuzeigen ist Aufgabe der Fundamentaltheologie - konkret für Balthasar: ist Aufgabe einer Theologischen Ästhetik, die die objektive Evidenz dessen aufzuzeigen hat, *dass* das Lebenszeugnis Jesus *als* die endgültige Selbsterschließung *Gottes* wahrnehmbar ist," Magnus Striet, "Wahrnehmung der Offenbarungsgestalt. Annäherung an die Ästhetik Hans Urs von Balthasars," in *Die Kunst Gottes verstehen. Hans Urs von Balthasars theologische Provokationen*, ed. Magnus Striet and Jan-Heiner Tück (Freiburg: Herder, 2005), 54-81, here 60.
[41] *Herrlichkeit I*, 196.

the prior question of *how* we perceive the divinity of God in the historical conditions of a divine

revelation, and which in turn can only be explained by reference to *what* is perceived in

revelation, its specific content. The latter topic makes up the central difficulty of the concept of

revelation, and, on von Balthasar's account, will also be the key to explaining the evidence

issue.[42]

All of this brings us closer to understanding why he designates the aesthetic notion of

"Gestalt" as the appropriate term of art to account for how a historical event could provide

evidence for its divinity.[43] As we have seen, his point of departure is the commitment that the

form of revelation is essential to, indeed, the primary mechanism of the sort of knowledge that

revelation aims to convey. Hence the need for a theological aesthetics: in order to make the

concept of revelation consistent, we require categories of knowledge native to aesthetics (as

opposed to, say, metaphysics, logic, or ethics) in order to capture the unique self-authorizing

character of the phenomenon we are trying to describe.[44] With all of this in view, we are in a

place to formulate the project of a theological aesthetics. It is a question of conceiving of

revelation by analogy with aesthetic knowledge, with the aim of furnishing the conceptual

resources we need to accommodate its paradoxical characteristics:

> Dieser Dualismus hebt sich nur auf, wenn man die Denkformen und Kategorien des
> Schönen miteinschliesst. Das Schöne ist vor allem eine *Gestalt*, und das Licht fällt

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[42] See also the cogent overview of the problem in Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Religion et esthétique," *Sciences ecclésiastiques* 12 (October 1960): 299-305.

[43] For a survey of von Balthasar's use of this term and the contexts in which it is employed, see Manfred Lochbrunner, *Analogia Caritatis. Darstellung und Deutung der Theologie Hans Urs von Balthasars* (Freiburg, Basel and Vienna: Herder, 1981), 168-175. As should be clear from the following argument, however, I think von Balthasar's use of the expression is much more methodical and systematic than Lochbrunner believes it to be; see ibid., 169-170.

[44] Claiming that there *is* an analogous relationship between the mode of knowing specific to revelation and a species of pedestrian knowledge obviously requires another theory about what human reason is like such that it can have this kind of knowledge to begin with. Unfolding just what von Balthasar these commitments are will be the task of the following chapter.

nicht von oben und aussen auf diese Gestalt, sondern bricht aus ihrem Innern hervor.[45]

Failing such an aesthetic account, we will inevitably end up in one of the conceptual dead ends we have traced so far, on one or the other unsatisfying sides of the dualism referred to in this passage.[46]

In light of everything that has been said, the theological import that von Balthasar wants to draw from aesthetics should be roughly clear in descriptions of aesthetic experience such as this one:

> Die sichtbare Gestalt "verweist" nicht nur auf ein unsichtbares Tiefengeheimnis, sie ist dessen Erscheinung, sie offenbart es, indem sie es freilich zugleich auch birgt und hüllt…Der Gehalt liegt nicht hinter der Gestalt, sondern in ihr. Wer die Gestalt nicht zu sehen und zu lesen vermag, der verfehlt ebendamit auch den Gehalt. Wem die Gestalt nicht einleuchtet, dem wird auch der Gehalt kein Licht werden.[47]

The defining trait of aesthetic knowledge on view in this passage is that the meaning of the object, what it gives us to know, is not an independent content that can be extracted, reformulated and entertained under a form different from that under which it is given. The function of the "Gestalt" vis-à-vis the aesthetic object is not decorative, but constitutive, which is to say that the meaning of the object is only expressed under these specific formal conditions. Thus, the meaning of an aesthetic object—for instance a novel, an opera, a painting or a sculpture—cannot be conceived as a nucleic content that can be distilled from its external mode of presentation and entertained without any essential loss. Subtracting from or altering its formal

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[45] *Herrlichkeit I*, 144.
[46] Cf. Jean-Luc Marion's lucid description of the necessary failure to which any attempt to demonstrate the truth of revelation through reason must lead: "Diese Vorhaben sind gescheitert und mussten es, weil ihnen nicht bewusst war, dass die Offenbarung ihnen nicht nur eine phänomenale Materie gibt, sondern ihr auch die sie begleitende Form und Bedeutung entspringt...Mit anderen Worten: Dass die Offenbarung nur die 'Gestalt' (ein Status des Phänomens) annimmt, die mit der phänomenalen Materie die eigenen Begriffe und Bedeutungen verbindet, wie sie die Schriften uns zugänglich machen," Jean-Luc Marion, "Das 'Phänomen Christi' nach Hans Urs von Balthasar," trans. Stefan Orth, in *Die Kunst Gottes verstehen. Hans Urs von Balthasars theologische Provokationen*, ed. Magnus Striet and Jan-Heiner Tück (Freiburg: Herder, 2005), 49-53, here 51.
[47] *Herrlichkeit I*, 144.

conditions would be to present a new object with an altogether new meaning. This thought is

captured paradigmatically in the case of poetry, in the sense that a poem cannot be paraphrased

without losing what it says, or at least what it says *as a poem*.[48] Such paraphrase does not present

the same meaning with a different external covering; the meaning of the object disappears, in

that it has not lost something incidental and cosmetic, but the essential means through which the

poem gives itself to be understood.

The fact that aesthetic form cannot be dissolved and reassembled without losing its sense

altogether hints at the unique self-warranting epistemological quality that is on view in aesthetic

knowledge. Just as we cannot translate the content of an artwork into a different form, neither

can we predict or derive its unity through rational deduction, by adding up individual parts and

treating them as atomic units of independent meaning capable of adding up to a work of art.

"Entzaubernde Auflösung des schönen 'Scheins' in irgendeine darunter- oder darüberliegende

'Wahrheit' hebt das Schöne auf und bezeugt damit, daß es in seinem Eigentümlichen gar nicht

wahrgenommen worden ist."[49] The elements of the aesthetic object are what they are as part of

the aesthetic whole, in a manner analogous to the constitutive parts of organic beings, and thus

can only be perceived as what they are if they are *already* taken to be parts of an aesthetic

unity.[50] This entails that such a unity must be given to us, we cannot produce it ourselves: "...im

ästhetischen Wahrnehmen [ist] eine Rückführung der erscheinenden Gestalt auf die eigene

Einbildungskraft unmöglich."[51] The key point here for the purposes of this discussion is that

unity of the aesthetic object cannot be anticipated or derived by rational processes, but rather

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[48] This paragraph draws on the discussion in David E. Wellbery, *The Specular Moment: Goethe's Early Lyric and the Beginnings of Romanticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 252-254.
[49] *Glaubhaft ist nur Liebe*, 35.
[50] "The painting, overturned and put out of perspective by its leaning sideways against the wall, bursts forth without warning, because it obeys its own *inner glow*, shows itself in itself because it gives itself on the basis of itself," Jean-Luc Marion, *Negative Certainties*, 176.
[51] *Glaubhaft ist nur Liebe*, 34.

must give itself to be perceived in an unforeseeable manner. Aesthetic forms, that is, receive

their distinctive character in that they dictate to us their conditions of intelligibility.[52]

But, and this is the key point, none of this entails that the meaning of an artwork is

something heterogeneous or alien to reason: the very fact that we recognize it as having a

meaning—that we see it as an intelligible unity—demonstrates its continuity with the other

domains of our rational practices.[53] If aesthetic experience offers us an example of a

phenomenon whose intelligibility cannot be anticipated ahead of time by reason, it does not do

so because it is located outside of reason altogether. The defining epistemological character of

the aesthetic object does not consist in some kind of irrationality, but in the unique way it enters

into our rational horizon, i.e. by constructing its own norms of understanding, instead of

corresponding (in a better or worse way) to a rational norm that we already possess. Indeed, the

unforeseeable quality of the beautiful phenomenon is not a hindrance to its knowability, but

rather the condition under which we understand the aesthetic phenomenon in the first place. This

is the quality that makes the aesthetic object *aesthetic*:

> Was uns entgegentritt ist überwältigend wie ein Wunder und darin vom
> Erfahrenden niemals einzuholen, besitzt aber gerade *als* Wunder seine
> Verstehbarkeit: es ist fesselnd und befreiend zugleich, wie es sich unzweideutig als
> "erscheinende Freiheit" (Schiller) von innerer unbeweisbarer Notwendigkeit
> gibt...Einen solchen Zusammenfall von Unerfindbarkeit durch mich mit
> eindringlichster Plausibilität für mich gibt es nur im Reich des interesselos
> Schönen.[54]

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[52] This formulation is indebted once again to the work of David Wellbery, particularly his recent theorization of the aesthetic object in terms of what he calls "endogenous form." See David E. Wellbery, "Selbstbezüglichkeit und Ursprünglichkeit der Form," in *Formbildung und Formbegriff. Das Formdenken der Moderne*, ed. Markus Klammer et al. (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2019), 181-198; see also David E. Wellbery, "Form und Idee. Skizze eines Begriffsfeldes um 1800," in *Morphologie und Moderne. Goethes "anschauliches Denken" in den Geistes- und Kulturwissenschaften seit 1800*, ed. Jonas Maatsch (Berlin and Boston: de Gruyter, 2014), 17-42.

[53] To pick up again the analogy with poetry, just because paraphrase is incapable of replacing the poetic meaning of the poem, this does not mean that paraphrase is not a legitimate—if not exhaustive—aspect of understanding the meaning of a poem. On the issues here, see Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 73-96.

[54] *Glaubhaft ist nur Liebe*, 34.

This is theologically significant because, if this account of aesthetic experience is correct, then perception of a beautiful object provides a model for a species of knowing in which a phenomenon dictates to reason the conditions of its intelligibility, while nevertheless doing so in a way that results in a relationship to the object we can legitimately call knowledge. It is this character of aesthetic experience that von Balthasar believes can resolve the question of evidence for revelation: the question should be one of attending to the *form* in which revelation expresses itself historically.[55]

At this point, the full scope of von Balthasar's criticism of the sign-conception of revelation—and the corresponding necessity for an alternative aesthetic account—comes full circle. If we attempt to locate the evidence for revelation elsewhere than its specific historical form, as if its external trappings could simply be shed once the content is possessed, we will find ourselves trapped in the dialectic that eventually brings us to lose our grip on the very concept of revelation. The only alternative remaining, von Balthasar is suggesting, is one in which the finite form in which God appears *just is the revelation*. There is no behind or above this form, and this is why it is necessary to invoke the notion of "Gestalt":

> Deshalb gilt es, genau zu bestimmen, was wir unter objektiver Evidenz verstehen.
> Es ist solche Evidenz, die vom Phänomen selbst her auf- und einleuchtet, und nicht
> solche, die auf Grund von Bedürfnisbefriedigung des Subjekts festgestellt wird. Die

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[55] There is another important dimension to von Balthasar's insistence on the theological significance of aesthetics that I will not be able to develop here. Roughly put, his claim is that the distinctive qualities of aesthetic experience not only constitute the perception of a work of art, but also disclose something about the nature of the world, about Being. The argument is that *any* access to the world occurs through a process of disclosure similar to our experience of art, and that reflecting on the structure of the latter provides us with a means of getting a grip on the former. In other words, the issues that have been discussed here under the rubric of aesthetics are fundamentally problems of metaphysics. See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit III, 1.1*, 21–39. See the helpful (critical) discussion of this dimension of von Balthasar's theory of Gestalt in Jörg Disse, *Metaphysik der Singularität. Eine Hinführung am Leitfaden der Philosophie Hans Urs von Balthasars* (Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 1996), 213–229. On von Balthasar's account, the emergence of "aesthetics" as an independent field of inquiry capable of abstracting from specific metaphysical commitments could only take place at the end of a centuries-long degeneration within western metaphysics itself; see the discussion of "Ästhetik als Wissenschaft" in Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit III, 1.2*, 928–940. On the modern tendency of restricting traditionally ontological categories to the subjective realm of aesthetics, see Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 48-106.

geschichtlich begegnende Gestalt ist an sich selbst überzeugend, weil das Licht, wodurch sie einleuchtet, von ihr selbst ausstrahlt und sich evidentermassen als ein solches, von der Sache her leuchtendes erweist.[56]

We require the aesthetic category of *Gestalt* to provide us with the conceptual resources necessary for describing how the individual, apparently accidental historical elements of revelation are in fact indispensable and constitutive of the meaning of what is revealed. If we attempt to get behind the historical specificity of revelation to its "real" content, we are blinding ourselves to both its meaning and the evidence it procures for its truth: "Die erste Voraussetzung des Verstehens ist die Hinnahme des Gegebenen, so wie es sich gibt. Macht man beim Evangelium von vornherein Abstriche, so ist das Phänomen nicht mehr integer und bereits unverständlich geworden."[57] It is the mutual determination among the individual elements making up the form of revelation that allows us, in turn, to conceive of how revelation could be said to furnish evidence for its truth in a way that neither reduces revelation to reason nor precludes its rationality, all in a process analogous to how aesthetic objects constitute their own rules for how we are supposed to understand them.[58]

Before examining how von Balthasar thinks Christian revelation uniquely qualifies as such a self-constituting aesthetic phenomenon (and therefore to resolve the evidence question), there is a further difficulty to consider that brings us back to the specific challenges involved in the fact that it is God who is supposed to appear in revelation. Although revelation confronts us

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[56] *Herrlichkeit I*, 446.

[57] *Herrlichkeit I*, 448-449.

[58] If it is right to say that we foreclose on the notion of revelation if we construe it as an essential content to be extracted from accidental external trappings, then any attempt to demythologize Christianity, to separate the true message of the Bible from its inessential mythical contaminations, deprives the Bible of any rational ground to stand on: "Mit anderen Worten: es kommt darauf an, ob einer überhaupt in echtem Sinn an eine wirkliche Menschwerdung Gottes glaubt. Glaubt er, dann ist eine 'Entmythologisierung' ein Widerspruch zu seinem Glauben: weil Gott als totaler Mensch nur in Bild und Gleichnis spricht (wie es der Herr Matth 13 grundsätzlich ausspricht). Glaubt er nicht, dann ist er gemäß Paulus und Johannes kein Christ. 'Gott im Fleisch' ist das Kriterium nach Johannes (II Joh 7). 'Gott in Tod und Auferstehung' ist das Kriterium nach Paulus (I Kor 15). Tertium non datur," Erich Przywara, *In und Gegen. Stellnungnahmen zur Zeit* (Nuremberg: Glock und Lutz, 1955), 275.

under finite empirical conditions, the essential quality we are supposed to perceive in such an event is its transcendent, divine character. This difficulty is augmented when we consider that terms like transcendence, unknowability, invisibility, and so forth do not describe limitations on human reason, but a constitutive quality of what God is in the first place. Knowledge of God "by definition implies incomprehensibility, to the point that a comprehensible God would immediately sink down to the rank of a plain idol."[59] This is just what we mean when we say things like God is infinite: God cannot be capture by *any* framework of finite knowledge, regardless of its scope. It would be a contradiction in terms to describe revelation as the process through which the incomprehensible God becomes the comprehensible God. God just *is* incomprehensible: if there is such a thing as knowledge of God, it would be have to be a kind of knowledge that "not only cannot reach certainty, but *must* not, since such a certainty would contradict what is to be known."[60] If what we know in revelation can be known comprehensively, in the way that we know finite objects, then whatever is revealed cannot be God. It does not matter if this process is one of reducing God to the limited conditions of human knowledge or expanding human rationality to be capable of grasping God: in either case, we would not perceive God, but some stand-in for God, and this would bring us back to all of the difficulties involved in trying to relate this representation back to the "real" God to which it refers.

Thus, we can further specify what is involved in the perception of God by employing the following paradox: knowledge of God means knowing God *as unknowable*. More will have to be said about how von Balthasar thinks we can make good on this formulation, but having it on the table brings into view the full conceptual itinerary of the theology of revelation offered in

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[59] Jean-Luc Marion, *Negative Certainties*, 206.
[60] Ibid., 205.

Herrlichkeit I.[61] Examining the commitments entailed by the notion of revelation has produced

three initial paradoxical requirements for its consistent articulation. These requirements are:

> (1) revelation must not only provide its own grounds of truth, but also explain *why* these
>
> grounds count as evidence that establish knowledge; therefore,
>
> (2) our access to revelation must consist in perceiving God himself, as opposed to a
>
> stand-in for God that we must then trace back to God;
>
> (3) such perception only counts as perception *of God* if what is recognized is precisely
>
> the unknowability of what appears.

As we have seen, von Balthasar's argument is that (3) is the only way to give a consistent

account of (2), and (2) is the only promising route to make good on (1), which is essential to

avoiding the epistemological dead ends that result from attempting to procure external evidence

for the origin of an event that purports to be divine. The question now is whether a consistent

account of a phenomenon with these characteristics *can* be offered. [62] To offer such a consistent

explanation is the task of von Balthasar's project.

The Icon of the Invisible God

At this point, the path which we have been following so far breaks off. Following von

Balthasar's lead, a reflection on the commitments required by the notion of divine revelation has

suggested that the sort of knowing that characterizes aesthetic experience seems to be the most

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[61] The difficult dimension that any attempt to make good on this description will have to articulate is how this description leaves space to differentiate between the way in which God is unknowable outside of revelation and the way in which he is unknowable even after he reveals himself. Or, put differently: how can we know anything at all of something when we know that it is unknowable?

[62] To reiterate, everything here is still being considered at the level of hypothesis. At this point, they are not being applied to a particular candidate of revelation, but aim to draw out the salient logical features presumed in the concept of revelation. Closer scrutiny could, of course, disclose that the kind of concept that makes these requirements is simply too paradoxical, and that it can only be formulated at the cost of irreconcilable rational contradictions. A demonstration that this is the case would mean that the idea of revelation can be rationally excluded at an *a priori* philosophical level. To anticipate, a version of this argument will be the basis of the rejection of the concept of revelation as developed in the intellectual narrative extending from Kant to Hegel.

promising species of knowledge for providing a model to describe how an event of revelation could establish its own conditions of intelligibility. To recall, the distinguishing quality of the aesthetic object is the kind of meaning constituted by its formal features. Essential to aesthetic experience, therefore, is the individuality of what is known, which likewise entails that the resulting knowledge cannot be predicted by other processes of reasoning but can only come about from direct contact with the thing itself. So, if Balthasar is right in suggesting that some kind of analogy with aesthetic knowledge is required for an adequate account of revelation, then it would be just as impossible to anticipate what a specific event of revelation will look like as it would be to predict the form and content of an unwritten poem. This inability of antecedent philosophical reflection to determine how an event of revelation could construct and fulfill its own conditions of possibility is, of course, a good sign that we have made some progress toward avoiding the rationalist reduction of revelation that we set out to prevent. Nevertheless, the result is that the problem that emerged at the conclusion of the previous section—that of how an event of revelation could embody the paradoxical qualities required by the concept—cannot be answered by a logical interrogation of the concept "revelation," any more than *a priori* reflection on the idea of a novel could produce a draft of *Effi Briest*.[63]

Just as it would be only by reading a book that we could understand how it embodies the concept of "novel," so too we can only proceed at this point by examining a particular candidate of revelation to get a further grasp on how an event of divine intervention could adequately

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[63] On the impossibility of deducing a work of art from a logical concept, see the discussion in Robert B. Pippin, *After the Beautiful: Hegel and the Philosophy of Pictorial Modernism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014). Even if we could derive a logical formulation that provided certain constraints on what a book would have to look like to count as an instance of the genre, such a concept alone would not allow us to deduce a particular novel. Even supposing a philosophical investigation could establish what counts as a novel in the first place, it could not predict how a *specific* piece of literature could embody the genre. In the same way, even though the concept of revelation that has been developed here produces certain requirements on revelation (failing which revelation would not be revelation), the logical notion that we have developed cannot say how a given case of revelation could satisfy these requirements.

disclose God. Although reflecting on the commitments presumed by the concept of revelation excludes a series of candidate models for how revelation might work, the same considerations also conclude that it is impossible to say anything more specific about *how* an event of revelation could be an adequate realization of the concept's requirements. At this point the kind of philosophical reflection we have been following so far stops, and leaves us with the (rather uninformative) conclusion: the concept of revelation means that God is made known *as* unknown—although we cannot say much more about the terms "God," "made known," or "unknown," since these are precisely what stand to be disclosed in the revelation itself.[64] What we are left with, then, is a particular picture of what revelation *cannot* be, without getting much more of a grip on what revelation *could* be.

What remains is von Balthasar's account of how Christian revelation avoids running afoul of the negative criteria of the concept of revelation. To put it roughly, his claim is that Christianity resolves the epistemological paradoxes of revelation by expanding the realm of what we have so far been counting as evidence. On von Balthasar's theory, the aporia of revelation, God becoming visible as God, is resolved by the foundational doctrine of Christianity: the Holy Trinity, as it is revealed in the Incarnation of its second member, the Son. The claim here is that the epistemological difficulties involved in establishing the divinity of revelation fall away when we consider the nature of the divinity we are trying to account for. On von Balthasar's account, we do not assert the truth of Christianity by taking a well-formed concept of divinity already in our possession and then inferring that the bible is a suitable instance of this notion. Rather, we

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[64] Although this does not entail that we have no grasp of this formulation, that it is a piece of sheer nonsense. The situation here is analogous to that of a riddle. Although the terms of the riddle, what *counts as* an answer to it, only become clear when viewed from the standpoint of the answer, we nevertheless have at least some grasp of what the question asks prior to uncovering the correct answer. If we did not, the riddle would never be able to get off the ground. See André Jolles, "Rätsel und Mythos," in *Germanica. Eduard Sievers zum 75. Geburtstag* (Halle: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1925), 632-645; and Cora Diamond and Roger White, "Riddles and Anselm's Riddle," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* 51 (1977): 143-186.

only come to know what divinity is to begin with in the context of revelation, and we acquire this

knowledge by perceiving it in the biblical revelation itself.[65] Indeed, the New Testament states

quite clearly what we are meant to take divinity to consist in: Trinitarian love.[66] To perceive God

in this way just is to see the truth of Christianity:

> Nicht daß Christus mächtiger ist als die übrigen Menschen (an unerhörtem Wissen
> und Willenskraft und sonstigen psychischen oder parapsychischen Fähigkeiten, die
> etwa seine Wunder erklären würden), macht entscheidend auf ihn aufmerksam,
> sondern daß er so "dienstgesinnt und bodennah von Herzen" (Mt 11, 29) und
> dadurch so "leer-ausgeräumt im Geist" (Mt 5, 3) sein will, daß durch diese
> menschliche Liebesgesinnung die absolute Liebe transparent hindurchscheinen und
> sich in ihr vergegenwärtigen kann.[67]

For von Balthasar, the Christian claim that God is love is inseparable from the question of

Christianity's truth, and this is not because of the important status of this claim within Christian

revelation, but because it provides a rigorous formulation of what is involved when we speak of

truth in the first place. How, then, does von Balthasar think that the content of Christianity

resolves the epistemological difficulties with which we began?

As we have seen, the central difficulty of revelation is that of providing an account of

how God could become intelligible to humanity in a way that does not reduce God to a human

concept. Von Balthasar begins his response to this problem by suggesting that the capacities

through which we perceive revelation correctly must derive from what is revealed:

> ...nicht wir fordern auf Grund unseres Dynamismus die Gnade, diese ist es, die
> uns anfordert und enteignet. Ihr Übergewicht in uns ist das, was uns nötigt, es ist

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[65] This paragraph draws on the argument in Romano Guardini, "Das Unendlich-Absolute und das Religiös-Christliche," in *Unterscheidung des Christlichen. Gesammelte Studien 1923-1963. Band 1: Aus dem Bereich der Philosophie*, 3rd ed. (Mainz: Matthias-Grünewald Verlag; Paderborn: Verlag Ferdinand Schönigh, 1994), 289-306, especially 298-299.

[66] Hence the point of departure for a Christian apologetic project would not be an examination of subjective capacities to receive divine revelation, but an investigation of what the content of revelation itself tells us about these capacities. In Vincent Holzer's formulation, "La foi ne signifie pas d'abord l'acte subjectif de foi (*fides qua*), mais comprend et intègre tout le contenu (*fides quae*) que cet acte a pour objet et à partir duquel il peut être expliqué et justifié," Vincent Holzer, "La théologie de la foi et le dépassement du modèle apologétique modern dans la pensée de Hans Urs von Balthasar," *Revista española de teologia* 73 (2013): 483-503, here 485.

[67] *Glaubhaft ist nur Liebe*, 66.

auch das, was Gott in uns die absolute Autorität verleiht. Die auctoritas Dei revelantis ist, in diesem ersten, alles grundlegenden Aspekt betrachtet, die sich selber in uns bezeugende Offenbarung selbst.Wir könnten und dürften niemals ein historisch Seiendes auf Grund göttlicher Bezeugung glauben, wenn wir es nicht kraft des sich selber bezeugenden Seins Gottes, das uns im inneren Gnadenlicht aufleuchtet, glaubten. Der Gottessohn, der in der Geschichte Gott bezeugt und von Gott bezeugt wird, überzeugt uns nur, weil wir Gottes Zeugnis in uns selber haben.[68]

The subjective conditions under which revelation can become visible to us cannot be determined by analyzing our subjectivity, but stem from the content of revelation. In the event of revelation, what is revealed constitutes the capacity for its perception in the subject. A phenomenon that gives us a new power of perception that we did not possess before is a strange idea, and von Balthasar is not suggesting that we simply help ourselves here with a kind of explanatory *deus ex machina*. His point is that the content of revelation must give us some explanation for how we are all of a sudden capable of perceiving what we shouldn't by nature be able to perceive.[69] Given that it is impossible for us to see revelation for what it is, its perception must involve ceasing to see the event as *we* see it and beginning to see it as *God* sees it.[70] It is up to revelation to explain how this is possible.

In the case of Christian revelation, the question of revelation undergoes a shift in meaning when we consider the specific nature of the divine that the Gospels claim to disclose to

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[68] *Herrlichkeit I*, 155.

[69] The presence of such a capacity precedes the question of deciding for or against the truth of revelation. It is only in light of its proper perception that revelation becomes an issue of faith or denial in the first place; see Thomas's comments on the *lumen fidei*: "infideles eorum quae sunt fidei ignorantiam habent, quia nec vident aut sciunt ea in seipsis, nec cognoscunt ea esse credibilia. Sed per hunc modum fideles habent eorum notitiam, non quasi demonstrative, sed inquantum per lumen fidei videntur esse credenda, ut dictum est," *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 1 a. 5 ad 1, Thomas Aquinas, *S. Thomae de Aquino Opera omnia*, ed. Enrique Alarcón (Pamplona: University of Navarra, 2000), https://www.corpusthomisticum.org/iopera.html. On the notion of the *lumen fidei* and its historical reception, see Erhard Kunz, "Wie erreicht der Glaube seinen Grund? Modelle einer 'analysis fidei' in der neuzeitlichen katholischen Theologie," *Theologie und Philosophie* 62 (1987): 352-381.

[70] Cf. Marion: "In order to see the uncovered *mystêrion*, it is thus necessary to pass from our spirit to the Spirit of God, so as to see it as God sees it. This is nothing other than an overturning of intentionality: taking the intentional gaze of God on God, instead of claiming to retain our intentionality in front of the intuition of the *mystêrion*," Jean-Luc Marion, *Givenness and Revelation*, trans. Stephen E. Lewis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 64.

us. Christ does not present himself as a messenger of God, nor does he claim that he alone is

God; rather, Christ identifies himself as the Son of the Father, the second person of the single

Holy Trinity. It is only by occupying this trinitarian position that Christ asks to be understood as

God. Divine sonship is the content of his divinity, the meaning of what it is for him to be divine.

But this adds a new dimension of complexity to seeing the *Gestalt* of revelation. The divinity of

Christ cannot be perceived by surveying his finite earthly actions and adding to them the

predicate of "divinity." Christian revelation specifies what we should understand by "divine" in

the first place by identifying divinity with the Holy Trinity. To say that Christ is divine without

thereby meaning that he is the Son of the Father would therefore be to miss Christ's divinity

altogether, at least in the way he wants us to understand divinity:

> Christus kann Zeichen (σημεῖα) wirken und setzen, und diese Zeichen werden in
> bedeutsamem Zusammenhang mit ihm selber stehen; aber er selbst ist mehr und
> anderes als nur Zeichen. Es ist nicht so, dass man ihn mit einer sich schliessenden
> rationale Erkenntnis als einen (vollkommenen? religiösen? genialen?) Menschen
> erkennen und etwa auf Grund dieser rationale Erkenntnis wie aus einem
> "Anzeichen" schliessen könnte, dass er Gottes Sohn und selber Gott ist. Vielmehr
> ist es nach dem Zeugnis der Evangelien und Johannes' insbesondere so, dass er in
> seiner Gestalt erst dann erkannt wird, wenn seine Gestalt als die gottmenschliche
> gesehen und verstanden wird, was dann freilich den Glauben an seine Gottheit
> zugleich einfordert und schon voraussetzt.[71]

Thus, recognizing the divinity of Christ—correctly perceiving his "form"—and seeing that this

divinity is Trinitarian make up a single act. Perceiving the divinity of revelation, in other words,

is not to attach the predicate "divine" to a specific set of events, but rather to recognize them as

an instance of the concept of divinity that the events themselves articulate. In the Christian

framework, the concept of "Trinity" is not an additional specification of the concept "divine,"

but coextensive with it.[72] If we do not perceive the trinitarian character of Christ's divinity, we

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[71] *Herrlichkeit I*, 146.

[72] Here is Guardini's description of this point: "Der christliche Gott ist 'der Gott Jesu Christi'. Jener, den Jesus meint, wenn er sagt: 'Mein Vater'. Jener, von dem Jesus gesendet wird. Von dem her er lebt, und auf den hin er

do not perceive his divinity at all, but only attribute to him a subjectively constructed notion of godhood.[73] Jesus's words in John 14:9, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father," also imply "Whoever has not seen the Father has not seen me."[74]

The Trinitarian character of revelation allows us to specify more precisely just what sort of disclosure is supposed to be given in the Gospels, and how it relates to the concept of God's incomprehensibility. In the self-understanding of Christian revelation, Christ, the visible *Gestalt*, only appears *as Christ* when he is understood as the image of the invisible God (εἰκών τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου; Col 1:15).[75] Christ's divinity only becomes *visible* to us in relation to the divinity of the Father who remains *invisible*:

> Wie die Einleitung zu zeigen versucht hat, gibt sich der Mensch Jesus (wenigstens johanneisch) primär als der Ausleger des Vaters. Der Vater ist Gott, nicht einfach eine aus der Gottheit herausgelöste Gestalt: "Niemand hat *Gott* je gesehen, der Eingeborene, der im Schoß des *Vaters* ruht, er hat ihn ausgelegt" (Joh 1,18). Das Wort, daß der Vater unsichtbar ist, wird nicht zurückgenommen, auch dort nicht, wo Jesus sagt: "Wer micht sieht, sieht den Vater" (14, 9). Man sieht den Unsichtbaren in seinem Ausleger.[76]

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gerichtet ist. Gott ist Jener, welcher ist 'der Gott und Vater Jesu Christi'," Romano Guardini, *Christliches Bewußtsein. Versuche über Pascal* (Mainz: Matthias-Grünewald-Verlag, 1991), 43. Or, as he succinctly puts it elsewhere: "So ist es denn nur folgerichtig, wenn Gott von Paulus als 'Gott, der Vater unseres Herrn Jesus Christus' (Kol. 1, 3) bestimmt wird. Er ist nicht Vater in sich und für sich, sondern auf Christus hin und nur von Christus her zu verstehen. Ebenso ist der Heilige Geist nicht Geist für sich, frei strömender religiöser Hauch, sondern mit Bezug auf Jesus," *Das Wesen des Christentums*, 46.

[73] Thus, despite the great esteem that Clement of Alexandria shows toward Greek thought and culture in the course of the *Stromata*, he does not hesitate to say that, for all of its theological endeavors, ancient thought never arrived at a notion of God purified of irrational admixtures, which only becomes possible with a Trinitarian conception of divinity: "Ἀλλ', ὡς ἔοικεν, οἱ φιλόσοφοι τῶν Ἑλλήνων θεὸν ὀνομάζοντες οὐ γιγνώσκουσιν, ἐπεὶ μὴ σέβουσι κατὰ θεὸν τὸν θεόν…Οὐ γὰρ περὶ θεοῦ τι λέγουσιν, ἀλλὰ τὰ ἑαυτῶν πάθη ἐπὶ θεὸν ἀνάγοντες ἐξηγοῦνται," Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* VI, 17.149.1-4, in *Clément d'Alexandrie: Les stromates, Stromate 6*, ed. and trans. Patrick Descourtieux, Sources chrétiennes, no. 446 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1999), 258.

[74] On this point, see the very helpful discussion in Jean-Luc Marion, *D'ailleurs, la révélation: Contribution à une histoire critique et à un concept phénoménal de révélation* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 2020), 478-481.

[75] Clement formulates this point unequivocally when he writes: "εἰσὶ γὰρ οἱ τὴν ⟨μὲν⟩ πίστιν ἡμῶν περὶ τοῦ υἱοῦ, τὴν δὲ γνῶσιν περὶ τοῦ πατρὸς εἶναι διαστέλλοντες. λέληθεν δὲ αὐτοὺς ὅτι πιστεῦσαι μὲν ἀληθῶς τῷ υἱῷ δεῖ, ὅτι τε υἱὸς καὶ ὅτι ἦλθεν καὶ πῶς καὶ διὰ τί καὶ περὶ τοῦ πάθους, γνῶναι δὲ ἀνάγκη τίς ἐστιν ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ. ἤδη δὲ οὔτε ἡ γνῶσις ἄνευ πίστεως οὔθ' ἡ πίστις ἄνευ γνώσεως, οὐ μὴν οὐδὲ ὁ πατὴρ ἄνευ υἱοῦ· ἅμα γὰρ τῷ πατὴρ υἱοῦ πατήρ, υἱὸς δὲ περὶ πατρὸς ἀληθὴς διδάσκαλος. καὶ ἵνα τις πιστεύσῃ τῷ υἱῷ, γνῶναι δεῖ τὸν πατέρα πρὸς ὃν καὶ ὁ υἱὸς αὖθίς τε ἵνα τὸν πατέρα ἐπιγνῶμεν, πιστεῦσαι δεῖ τῷ υἱῷ, ὅτι ὁ τοῦ θεοῦ υἱὸς διδάσκει," Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* V, 1.1.1-4, in *Clément d'Alexandrie: Les stromates, Stromate 5*, ed. and trans. Allain de Boulluec and Pierre Voulet, Sources chrétiennes, no. 278 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1981), 24.

[76] *Theologik II*, 61-62. See also: "Doch ist so die Gestalt der Christusoffenbarung erst indirekt, als Vollendung der Weltgestalt, in ihrer Gestalthaftigkeit gekennzeichnet. Direkt wird sie es erst, wenn sie im Glauben als Erscheinung

That is, we only understand Christ, the visible form of revelation, when we realize that what this form reveals remains invisible in the very form itself: the trinitarian God.[77] It would miss the mark entirely to say that Christ demystifies God and discloses everything about him that was previously unknown. Rather, what is revealed in Christ is the incomprehensible God *as* the incomprehensible God.

God can be revealed to us while nevertheless remaining invisible to us because of *what* it is that he is revealed to be: trinitarian love. It is only on in reference to the *content* of Christianity that the epistemological difficulties we have been tracing can be resolved: "…wäre Gott nicht dreieinig (was ein Mysterium ist und bleibt), so wäre er nicht (in sich) die Liebe, und daran hängt die ganze Plausibilität des Christentums."[78] The thought here is that approaching the evidence issue from the beginning with an eye to the specifics of Christian revelation brings about a shift in the terms in which we had originally posed the question, which we now see as restrictive, incapable of attending to the most crucial data required to resolve the problem. Making good on this claim is a tall order, since it seems to make the circular claim that arguing in favor of

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des dreieinigen Gottes gesehen wird; erst in der Gottheit Christi, das heisst in dem Verhältnis in ihm zwischen den beiden Naturen, und eben darin in seinem Verhältnis zum Vater im Heiligen Geist tritt die eigene und innerste Gestalthaftigkeit der christlichen Offenbarung zutage. Indem das Erscheinende sich keineswegs als ein phainomenon des einfachen Eins gibt, sondern als das Sichtbar- und Erfahrbarwerden des in sich selbst dreieinigen Gottes, *ist die Offenbarungsgestalt nicht Erscheinung als Grenze (πέρας) einer unendlichen Un-Gestalt (ἄπειρον), sondern die einer unendlich bestimmten Über-Gestalt,*" *Herrlichkeit I*, 415-416, my emphasis.

[77] The fact that the invisibility of the Father is preserved in revelation is another claim that is given significant attention by Clement, whose writings are replete with formulations like this one: "Ὁ μὲν οὖν θεὸς ἀναπόδεικτος ὢν οὐκ ἔστιν ἐπιστημονικός, ὁ δὲ υἱὸς σοφία τέ ἐστι καὶ ἐπιστήμη καὶ ἀλήθεια καὶ ὅσα ἄλλα τούτῳ συγγενῆ, καὶ δὴ καὶ ἀπόδειξιν ἔχει καὶ διέξοδον," Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* IV, 25.156.1, in *Clément d'Alexandrie: Les stromates, Stromate 4*, ed. and trans. Annewies van den Hoek and Claude Mondésert, Sources chrétiennes, no. 463 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2001), 318. See also Origen's remarks in Homily Three of Origen, *In lucam homiliae*, in *Origenes. In lucam homiliae. Homilien zum Lukas Evangelium*, ed. and trans. Hermann-Josef Sieben, Fontes Christiani 4 (Freiburg: Herder, 1991), vol. 1, 78-82.

[78] *Der antirömische Affekt. Wie läßt sich das Papsttum in der Gesamtkirche integrieren?* 2nd ed. (Trier: Johannes Verlag Einsiedeln, 1989), 4. See also his remark on the interpretative indispensability of this doctrine for making sense of the figure of Christ in the New Testament: "Die Dreieinigkeit Gottes ist, wenn auch ein dem Verstand unzugängliches Licht, die einzige Hypothese, deren Ansetzung das Phänomen Christi...phänomenologische sachgerecht, ohne Vergewaltigung der Tatsachen zu klären gestattet," *Glaubhaft ist nur Liebe*, 58.

Christianity can only be done if we have already assumed the conclusion to be true. Von Balthasar's central aim in the seven volumes of *Herrlichkeit* is to show that the circularity on view here is not vicious, and the fact that we are dealing with some kind of self-referential circular model of justification is itself a sign of the rationality of Christian revelation. Exactly why von Balthasar thinks he is justified in saying this will not be clear until the end of chapter two.

Leaving aside the circularity problem for a moment, let's return to what von Balthasar thinks is at stake in the Christian notion of God as love. His claim is that our access to the phenomenon of love occurs through a set of epistemic conditions that differ essentially from those of conceptual knowledge, such that we have gone wrong from the beginning if we attempt to describe in categories of discursive concepts our knowledge of a God who somehow turns out to "be" love. It is essential to love to be unforeseeable and uncontrollable. I can neither will nor predict the appearance of another's love. Its presence is contingent, and, like all contingencies, unforeseeable. It is simply *there*, and this contingency cannot be anticipated by deductive reasoning. Unlike other contingent objects around me, however, (this chair that I am sitting on, the pen in my hand, the noises around me), the love of another places a demand on me, that of a response—even if only one of feigned ignorance. Love places a requirement on me that I cannot escape, and I cannot explain *why* this requirement has come into being beyond the brute fact that this person loves me.[79] But this inexplicability does not mean that love is unintelligible. On the contrary, the impossibility of answering a "why" question regarding this individual appearance of love is the indispensable means through which I recognize this phenomenon *as* love, the

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[79] These formulations follow the position developed in Jean-Luc Marion, *The Erotic Phenomenon*, trans. Stephen E. Lewis (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2008). Cf. the discussion in Stanley Cavell, "Performative and Passionate Utterance," in *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 155-191.

quality that distinguishes love from an economic selection, a prudential gamble, or any other type of rational calculation that could give rise to actions similar to those of the lover. I cannot demand the love of another. I can attempt to do so, but the fact of demanding renders questionable any response I might receive; the fact that I can account for its origin as one that I have artificially manufactured thereby deprives me of what I set out to acquire. And, von Balthasar wants to say, this phenomenological situation forms a precise analogue to our experience of God when he discloses himself in revelation:

> Der Inhalt dieses Handelns kann wesensmäßig aus keiner Seite der geschaffenen Natur apriori abgelesen oder vermutet werden, weil es vom Andern *als* Andern in abgründiger Freiheit auf seinen Andern zu erfolgt, und keinerlei Gleichsinnigkeit oder gar Identität eine vergängige Brücke des Verständnisses schafft...Das von Gott für den Menschen Getane ist vielmehr gerade nur insofern "verstehbar", als es vom Menschlich-Weltlich-Fragmentarischen her *nicht* zu verstehen und zu rechtfertigen ist, daran gemessen als "Torheit" und "Wahnsinn" erscheinen muß.[80]

An explicable love, that is, one that I can explain as the necessary consequence of antecedent causes, rather than the spontaneous gift of the other, would not be love. If love is to appear at all, it must appear in a way that I cannot explain.[81] The mandatory inexplicability of love will be the key to responding to two difficulties that we have repeatedly encountered in the idea of a historical revelation: historical contingency and preserving God's incomprehensibility.

First, the contingency issue: all of the difficulties that have emerged in attempting to delineate a coherent concept of revelation follow from the initial paradox of trying to bridge the gap between a historical—and therefore contingent—event, and knowledge of the eternal, incomprehensible God. Von Balthasar wants to say that these difficulties fall away once we

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[80] *Glaubhaft ist nur Liebe*, 46.

[81] In Marion's formulation: "Love does not suffer from the unthinkable or from the absence of conditions, but is reinforced by them…Love loves without condition, simply because it loves; he thus loves without limit or restriction. No refusal rebuffs or limits that which, in order to give itself, does not await the least welcome or require the least consideration," Jean-Luc Marion, *God without Being*, 2nd. ed., trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), 47.

consider the nature of the knowledge that the historical event is meant to reveal: God as

trinitarian love, revealed through the Incarnation and suffering of Christ out of his love for

humanity. If God is love, then we can *only* gain access to what God is through an accidental and

inexplicable truth of history: "So wird eine Verständlichkeit möglich, die die reine Faktizität des

Historischen aufhellt zu Nezessität, und gleichzeitig wird unmöglich jede Reduktion auf das vom

Menschen her Erforderte oder (aus welchen Gründen immer) Erwartete."[82] The unpredictability

and contingency of love are not a hindrance to perceiving and knowing it, but rather the very

conditions under which love makes itself known to us. On the Christian conception of God, the

contingency of revelation and the eternity of God do not conflict with one another on the plane

of knowledge, as we would expect to be the case without recourse to the content of Christian

revelation.[83] If the doctrine of God described in Christian revelation is true, then the historicity of

revelation is not an epistemic weakness, a threat to our knowledge of God, but the sole vehicle

through which God could reveal himself adequately.[84]

     The second implication of the content of Christian revelation concerns what we have seen

to be the indispensable quality of any coherent event of revelation: God must be known in his

unknowability. Considering everything that has been said so far, it should be clear that the

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[82] *Glaubhaft ist nur Liebe*, 35.

[83] Von Balthasar published a short essay on this issue in the same year that saw the publication of *Glaubhaft ist nur Liebe*: Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Christ und offene Vernunft," *Giornale di Metafisica: Rivista bimestrale di filosofia* 18, no. 6 (1963): 553-560. See also Romano Guardini's journal entry of April 12th, 1954, where he writes: "…ich habe Josef von der Frage erzählt, die mich verfolgt und mit der ich nicht fertig werde, so, da ich manchmal fürchte, sie könne mir den Glauben zerfallen machen: wie es möglich sein solle, daß der absolute Gott Endliches bewirken—vor allem aber, mit Endlichem in Ihn bindende Beziehung treten könne…Da kam plötzlich eine Antwort: durch die Undenkbarkeit des Verkündeten wurde auf etwas schlechthin Unbegreifliches in Gott, in seinem Wesen, seiner Gesinnung und seinem Werk hingedeutet—und das sei das Eigentlich-Geoffenbarte und der Sinn von allem," Romano Guardini, *Stationen und Rückblicke. Breichte über mein Leben*, ed. Franz Henrich (Mainz: Matthias-Grünewald Verlag; Paderborn: Verlag Ferdinand Schöningh, 1995), 230.

[84] See Przywara's formulation: "Die erschreckende Zufälligkeit des Erscheinens Christi…ist letztlich nichts anderes als die fast notwendige Offenbarung des ersten Paradoxes Christi…das alles, vom eigentlichen Wesen Christi aus, nicht Schwierigkeit, sondern Beweis, nicht Einwurf, sondern geradezu Forderung, nicht Verhüllung, sondern Enthüllung," Erich Przywara, *Gott. Fünf Vorträge über das religionsphilosophische Problem*, in *Religions-philosophische Schriften* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1962), 243-372, here 290.

concept God revealed in Christian revelation—the trinitarian God of love—aims to do just this.

The Christian notion of the divine does not infringe on the essential unknowability of God but

intensifies it, and it is through this very intensification that Christianity claims to make God

uniquely accessible to the believer:

> Angesichts der Majestät der absoluten Liebe, die sich offenbarend auf den Menschen zutritt, ihn einholt, ihn in unbegreifliche Intimität einlädt und erhebt, ahnt der endliche Geist zum erstenmal, was das eigentlich heißt, daß Gott der Ganz-Andere, "der Unbegreifliche, wesenhaft von der Welt Unterschiedene, in sich und durch sich Seligste und über alles, was außer ihm ist und erdacht werden kann, unaussprechlich Erhabene" ist (Vatic. I ss 3 c 1). Außerhalb dieser Offenbarung der Liebe bleibt alle negative Theologie so leer, daß sie immerfort in Gefahr ist, entweder in Atheismus (oder Agnostizismus), oder in Identitätsphilosophie (oder -mystik) abzugleiten. Hier jedoch, wo die Offenbarungsfigur unverständlich bleibt, außer sie wird auf Gottes Liebe hin ausgelegt, *erscheint* in der bestürzenden, endgültig uneinholbaren Unfaßlichkeit dieser göttlichen Liebe das Ganz-anders- und Je-immer-größer-Sein Gottes handgreiflich. Genau in der Bewegung, in der das Geschöpf sich ans Herz Gottes gezogen sieht und fühlt, erfährt es bis in die Abgründe sein eigenes Nicht-Gott-Sein, klärt sich ihm unerbittlich und inappellabel jenes erste alles durchwaltende Verhältnis des absoluten und relativen, des göttlichen und weltlichen Seins.[85]

The trinitarian character of revelation, von Balthasar wants to say, provides an account of how

God could be meaningfully revealed without thereby collapsing into a process of "pure"

unveiling. The unveiling that does occur only takes place through a simultaneous concealment:

the visible Christ is only manifest to the extent that he is perceived as the Son of the invisible

Father. [86] Hence von Balthasar's summary characterization of Christian revelation as "die Art der

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[85] *Glaubhaft ist nur Liebe*, 37-38.

[86] "Man kann nicht sagen, daß in der Analogie losigkeit der Gestalt Christi das absolut Unfaßliche, daß 'Gott Liebe ist,' faßlich geworden sei. Dies wäre blanker Widerspruch. Christi Gestalt ist kein statisch hingestelltes Denkmal, sondern versteht sich ganz als Verweis. Das Kreuz sagt: "'o sehr hat Gott die Welt geliebt"'(Joh 3, 16). Gott der Vater, dessen Wort an die Welt aber Jesu eigenes Wort ist, in dessen Liebe die väterliche Liebe "ausgelegt" wird (Joh 1, 18), und das der Geist der Liebe für uns und in uns als das Wort der Liebe unabsehbar immer neu erläutert. Das Wort: 'Niemand hat Gott je gesehen,' und das nachfolgende: 'er einziggeborene Gott, der zum Schoß des Vaters hin ist, hat ihn ausgelegt' (Joh 1, 18), widersprechen einander nicht: das zweite hebt das erste nicht auf, sondern bestätigt es – auslegend," Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Epilog* (Trier: Johannes Verlag Einsiedeln, 1987), 75.

Offenbarkeit Gottes im Geschöpf: Enthüllt in je grösserer Verhülltheit."[87] The visible *Gestalt* of

Christ does not take the invisibility of God and make it visible, but presents the visible

manifestation of the invisibility of God.[88] God's self-disclosure of himself does not domesticate

or annul his unknowability, but allows us to perceive him *in* his unknowability:

> Die Grundgestalt der "je grösseren Unähnlichkeit in so grosser Ähnlichkeit" (in tanta similitudine major dissimilitudo Dz 432) ist unaufhebbar; aber sie wandelt sich ab von einer philosophischen "negativen Theologie," in welcher über alle analogen Aussagen über Gott hinaus sein Wesen dahinter unendlich verborgen und unerforschbar bleibt—bis zu einer offenbarungstheologischen "negativen Theologie," in welcher Gott bis ins äusserste "erscheint" und deshalb auch in seiner je grösseren Unbegreiflichkeit wirklich in den Vordergrund und in die Erscheinungsgestalt tritt. Das Unbegreifliche Gottes ist nun nicht länger ein blosser Ausfall an Wissen, sonder eine positive Gottbestimmtheit des Glaubenswissens…das ist die im Sichenthüllen erscheinende Verhüllung, die im Erfassen fassbar gewordene Unfasslichkeit Gottes.[89]

This why Paul describes revelation as God "having made known the *mystery* of his will"

(γνωρίσας ἡμῖν τὸ μυστήριον τοῦ θελήματος, Eph 1:9).[90] God makes himself known, but he

makes himself known *as mystery*. God loses nothing of his unknowability in revelation, and yet

this is not a hindrance to our knowledge of God.[91] The "unknowing" knowledge that we have in

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[87] *Herrlichkeit I*, 433.

[88] Von Balthasar is at pains to emphasize that the hiddenness of God runs throughout biblical revelation, especially in Jesus's entire life of anonymity, poverty, and rejection, all of which apparently reject our intuitive notion of divine power and authority. The climax of this intensifying process of concealment in the crucifixion is not a contradiction God's glory, but its consummate manifestation: "In Jesus Christus vollendet sich Gottes Offenbarkeit in der Verhüllung. Nicht erst im Leidensgeschehen, schon in der Menschwerdung. Schon im reinen Faktum, dass das Wort Fleisch wird. Unausdenkbares Paradox, in welchem alle Paradoxe der Schöpfung und Heilsgeschichte zusammenlaufen," *Herrlichkeit I*, 439. A concise discussion of the relevant issues here can be found in Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Bruch und Brücke zwischen Wirken und Leiden Jesu," in *Christusglaube und Christusverehrung. Neue Zugänge zur Christusfrömmigkeit*, ed. Leo Scheffzczyk (Aschaffenburg: Paul Pattloch Verlag, 1982), 14-24.

[89] *Herrlichkeit I*, 443-444.

[90] The hiddenness of God in revelation also explains Jesus's claim that his message will *necessarily* provoke resistance among its hearers: "Die Modalität, die das Ausdrucksbild Gottes durch die Sünde der Welt gewinnt: sein Ärgernis- und Entscheidungscharakter, hebt den Offenbarungs- und damit Ausdruckscharakter nicht auf, ja setzt ihn bis ins letzte voraus: bis in die Trümmer des Bildes ewigen Lebens am Kreuz ist es, in allem Paradox und über alles Paradox hinweg: Offenbarung, ja gesteigerte, höchste Offenbarung, höchster Selbstausdruck dieses ewigen Lebens," *Herrlichkeit I*, 423.

[91] See Vincent Holzer's helpful discussion in Vincent Holzer, *Le Christ devant la raison. La christologie devenue philosophème* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2017), 299-322, especially 305: "La distance entre Dieu et la créature n'est pas annulée dans l'analogie christologique, mais elle est rendue manifeste, non comme radicale dissemblance, mais comme seul mode approprié de rapport."

revelation is not a pseudo-knowledge, as if it could be replaced by the more desirable exhaustive

knowledge of full comprehension, but rather the sole condition under which God can become

visible to us.[92]

With all of this on the table, we can begin to summarize how von Balthasar proposes that

the distinctive content of Christian revelation resolves the strictly philosophical aporia of

revelation with which we began. To sum up: recall that the initial difficulty consisted in

conceiving how the transcendent God could manifest himself in a finite form in such a way that

we would not have to infer his presence subsequently on the basis of visible signs. Balthasar's

response to this difficulty is the trinitarian character of the historical events of revelation,

composed of the Incarnation and life of Christ. This trinitarian quality, in turn, is supposed to

describe how revelation discloses God in such a way that he remains invisible (and thus

irreducible to any pedestrian phenomenon or demand of our subjectivity), and yet manifests this

invisibility in an intelligible historical *Gestalt*: We really do *see* God as he is in this *Gestalt*; we

do not merely infer his invisible presence from the visible form that we are able to see.

This leads us back to the starting question of the chapter: how does the *Gestalt* of Christ

furnish its own criterion of authenticity? Von Balthasar thinks that the above considerations

regarding the trinitarian character of revelation have already accomplished the essential work of

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[92] One could object at this point that, if God remains incomprehensible after revelation, the event of revelation does not seem to change our relation to God from its state prior to the revelation, which saw God only as an incomprehensible. But this objection misunderstands the nature of what is disclosed in revelation. The difference between the two standpoints is not the shift from incomprehensibility to comprehensibility, but rather from an indeterminate incomprehensibility to a determinate one. That is, God's concealedness takes on a concrete form: the incomprehensible union of glory and humiliation, word and flesh. This is the ground of von Balthasar's claim that the mystery character of Christian revelation is evidence for its truth, rather than an objection against its authenticity: "Man merke wohl, dass dieser Charakter des sich im Offenbaren als unbegreiflich erweisenden Gottes zur objektiven Evidenz der Offenbarungsgestalt gehört, deshalb nicht vor allem durch die Dunkelheit des irdischen Glaubens bedingt ist. Sie wird diesen Charakter in der Schau Gottes von Angesicht nicht verlieren können, im Gegenteil, gerade dort wird die je grössere Unfasslichkeit Gottes in allem Erfassen notwendig zu ihrer höchsten Gegebenheit kommen müssen," *Herrlichkeit I*, 444.

finding an answer. Take, for instance, the following passage on the necessity of the Trinity in

perceiving Christ accurately in the first place:

> Man kann schon hier im voraus das Trinitarische dieser Offenbarung ahnen: soll es wirklich so sein, dann braucht es ihrer Drei in Gott, die sich offenbaren: der Sohn offenbart Gott in der Knechtsgestalt, aber der Heilige Geist beleuchtet als Herrlichkeit Gottes diese Knechtsgestalt und lässt ihre Herrlichkeit sehen; aber damit nicht genug: hätte nicht der Sohn im schlichten Menschenwort mehr ausgesagt als ein Mensch kann, hätte er nicht in seinem Zeugnis vom Vater auch das Zeugnis des Vaters für ihn gehabt (der des Vaters Wort ist), so hätte die Verklärung des Sohnes durch den Heiligen Geist niemals etwas aufglänzen lassen können, was nicht im Menschsein des Sohnes bereits offenbar war.[93]

In order to perceive the Gestalt of revelation in the first place, that is, to see Christ *as* the Son, we

must be enabled to do so by the Holy Spirit.[94] But the perception that Christ's testimony about

himself is true only comes about by seeing that it is the Father who testifies on behalf of the Son

and vindicates the testimony of the latter. And none of this is a two-step process, as if we first

perceived the *Gestalt* of Christ and only then inferred that inherent to this form is a Trinitarian

process of divine witness. To miss the latter would mean that we never actually saw the *Gestalt*

in the first place. This is because revelation does not only present us with a unique phenomenon,

but also an interpretation of that phenomenon from the only standpoint that is capable of

comprehending it, the standpoint of God:

> Das Schriftwort ist das Wort im Modus der Kontemplation seiner eigenen Aktion, der deutenden Registrierung. Diese kann von niemandem gültig und adäquat

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[93] *Herrlichkeit I*, 440-441.

[94] The Trinitarian dimension of Christianity is also supposed to explain how revelation should give us the ability to recognize the God whom it is essentially impossible for us to see. In this case, revelation is supposed to resolve this difficulty by invoking the enabling role of the Holy Spirit: "In der Forderung eines solchen Hindurchblickens liegt gewiß eine Überforderung der menschlichen Natur; deshalb wird ihr zu Leistung dieses Durchblicks der Heilige Geist verheißen, der 'in alle (meine) Wahrheit einführen wird' (Joh 16, 13). Aber wie Jesus als Sohn Gottes in eine wahre Menschennatur eingetreten ist, so wird der Geist nicht oberhalb des menschlichen Begreifens schweben bleiben, sondern in dieses eingehen, um mit ihm zusammen, es befähigend, den erforderten Durchblick vom Menschen Jesus zum Göttlichen zu ermöglichen…Ein Einsehen, um es nochmals zu sagen, das analog zu mitmenschlicher Erkenntnis den Glauben als Sich-anvertrauen einschließt," *Epilog*, 71. As the last sentence of this passage makes clear, von Balthasar thinks that this kind of augmented seeing is analogous to some kind of knowing that is already on view in normal human experience, and this is why we are justified in regarding the resulting perception as continuous with our pedestrian rational practices. Reconstructing how *this* claim can be made consistent without falling back into a version of the rationalist position will form the topic of the following chapter.

vollzogen werden als vom Wort selber, da nur Gott den ganzen Umfang seiner Offenbarung ermißt und die gültige menschliche Wortform prägen kann, die sie auffängt.[95]

In this case, the interpretation of the life of Christ that the Bible gives us is that of the second member of the Trinity. To perceive Christ is thus to recognize that the event of revelation that he embodies is not one theological event alongside a set of doctrinal claims that will require their own subsequent justification. Rather, the Father's testimony to the authenticity of this *Gestalt* is already perceived *in the Gestalt itself*: to see Christ correctly is also to see the evidence for Christ, otherwise Christ is not seen at all. The evidence for revelation is thus internal to its Trinitarian structure: seeing revelation *is* seeing its truth. Belief is the point of departure for, not the consequence of understanding what revelation gives to be known.[96]

Von Balthasar goes a step further and claims that the trinitarian character of revelation can be subsequently reconstructed and put forth as the objective evidence for Christianity by illustrating the internal unity of its historical form. The argument is that the biblical *Gestalt* exhibits an unparalleled and inexhaustible harmony between its individual components and the whole that it aims to convey, the trinitarian God of Christian belief. A careful examination of the facts of revelation reveals that what appeared to be a finite form among others in fact evinces the infinitude of depth of the only kind that is capable of expressing the unknowable God:

> Die historische Offenbarung ist als ganze so durchstrukturiert, daß sie dem Kontemplierenden an ihrer Struktur, an ihren Verhältnissen, Proportionen, Bezogenheiten ihre spezifisch göttliche Richtigkeit erweist. Denn so klar und überzeugend diese Beziehungen sind, sie sind doch nicht erschöpfbar, nicht nur praktisch nicht, weil die Kraft nicht ausreicht, bis ans Ende zu gehen, sondern auch

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[95] Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Wort, Schrift, Tradition," in *Verbum Caro. Skizzen zur Theologie I*, (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1960), 11-27, here 11.

[96] See the discussion in Romano Guardini, "Lebendiger Geist," in *Unterscheidung des Christlichen. Gesammelte Studien 1923-1963. Band 1: Aus dem Bereich der Philosophie*, 3rd ed. (Mainz: Matthias-Grünewald Verlag; Paderborn: Verlag Ferdinand Schönigh, 1994), 138-163, esp. 145f.

grundsätzlich nicht, weil das in der Evidenz der Strukturen Aufleuchtende ein ins Unendliche Öffnendes ist.[97]

The recognition of this unique character of the biblical *Gestalt* is, in turn, the evidence that revelation is true: "Die innere und notwendige gegenseitige Zuordnung dieser Aspekte der Offenbarungsgestalt, man möchte sagen: ihre theologische dreidimensionale Plastizität, wird zu ihrer Evidenz für den Blick des Glaubens gehören."[98] The apologetic evidence that can be provided for the truth of revelation is a subsequent reconstruction of the perception of revelation.[99] The more clearly we *see* revelation—the better we perceive the internal unity of its components—the more clearly we *know* its truth. All rational defenses of Christianity are nothing more than derivative reconstructions of this primitive act of perceiving and can only point to revelation in the same way as descriptions of the beauty of a painting can finally only point to the canvas: we can only know the beauty of a painting by seeing it. The truth of Christianity is not a question of knowing more about it, but of more clearly perceiving its form.

This claim repeats the biblical and early Christian apologetic method of defending the truth of Christianity by arguing that the appearance of Christ fulfills the prophecies of the Old

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[97] Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Offenbarung und Schönheit," in *Verbum Caro. Skizzen zur Theologie I*, (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1960), 100-134, here 123. The also the discussion of this topic in another essay from this volume, Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Wort und Schweigen," in *Verbum Caro. Skizzen zur Theologie I*, (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1960), 135-155.

[98] *Herrlichkeit I*, 440-441.

[99] Of course, the complete perception of revelation does not happen all at once. In fact, its completeness is never exhausted, and the extent to which we perceive is directly related to the extent of our ethical response to the demands of revelation. See *Herrlichkeit I*, 442; on the implications of this relationship between practice and theory for biblical interpretation, see Brian McNeil, "The Exegete as Iconographer: Balthasar and the Gospels," in *The Analogy of Beauty: The Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar*, ed. John Riches (Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark Ltd., 1986), 134–146. This further entails that the misperception of revelation is in no way indicative of a lack of evidence in the form itself. Such a failure can only be due to electing not to see the openly available evidence: it is a result of human freedom, not of objective absence: "Das Verfehlen der Gestalt Jesu geschieht nicht auf Grund ungenügender sachlicher Evidenz, sondern aus der Schuld der 'Finsternis', die das Licht nicht sieht, nicht erkennt, nicht aufnimmt," *Herrlichkeit I*, 502. On this issue, see Raymund Schwager, "Der Sohn Gottes und die Weltsünde. Zur Erlösungslehre von Hans Urs von Balthasar," *Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie* 108 (1986): 5–44.

Testament.[100] The point of this strategy is not to appeal to supernatural powers of prediction, but to draw out the self-constructing form of biblical revelation and thereby to reconstruct its internal evidence:

> Was der Glaube hier ineins sieht, ist nicht fromme Kontemplation, sondern objektive Evidenz. Gottes Masse und Formen lassen sich nicht halbieren: die Mass-Form, die er hinstellt, ist von vornherein vollkommen, auch wenn sie einem zeitlichen Ablauf (der selber nur sinnvoll sein kann) unterliegt und, einer Statue entsprechend, umschritten werden muss, um als ganze gesehen zu werden.[101]

And at this point we have come full circle, to the point at which we can see the definitive inadequacy of the sign model of revelation.[102] If the authenticity of divine revelation in history can only be demonstrated by appealing to its holistic unity, then every element of revelation to the minutest details is constitutive of the truth of revelation. To attempt to treat the finite historical features of divine revelation as a sort of regrettably necessary packaging that could be left behind once we get at the "real" content of revelation would be to lose the sole means of perceiving the truth of revelation.[103]

Revelation and Reason

To summarize the argument up to this point: considering the demands inherent in the concept of revelation discloses that revelation must a) establish its own conditions of truth in a

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[100] Von Balthasar's own account of the relationship between the Old and New Testaments comprises the two concluding volumes of *Herrlichkeit*, in which he tries to give a concrete reconstruction of how the biblical texts provide the evidence to which he makes reference here in the form of a promissory note. For a general survey of his argument, see Volker Spangenberg, *Herrlichkeit des Neuen Bundes. Die Bestimmung des biblischen Begriffs der "Herrlichkeit" bei Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1993).

[101] *Herrlichkeit I*, 458.

[102] Cf. *Herrlichkeit I*, 480f.

[103] As a consequence of this notion of a *Gestalt* of revelation, we can also specify what it would mean to deny the legitimacy of Christian revelation in spite of its objective evidence. Such a denial could only follow from an incomplete perception of the Gestalt of Christ, one that fails to see the inner unity therefore objective evidence that is constitutive of revelation in Christ: "Für die Einzigkeit der Gestalt wie für die ganze hier entwickelte Lehre von der Gestalthaftigkeit des Christlichen gibt es eine negative Bewährungsprobe: der Erweis, dass jeder, der die Gestalt Christi ablehnt, sie objektiv ganz oder teilweise verfehlt. Nicht nur hat er nicht die nötige subjektive Begeisterung dafür beigebracht (diese kann er nur aufbringen, wenn die Gestalt ihn zuvor überzeugt hat), sondern man kann ihm objektiv nachweisen, dass er bei seinem Sichten der Gestalt wesentliche Aspekte übersehen oder an ihnen vorbeigesehen und (da es Gottes Wort ist) daran vorbeigehört hat,"*Herrlichkeit I*, 490.

way that cannot be anticipated by natural reason and b) allow God to appear while remaining invisible, incomprehensible, and so forth. Although this kind of philosophical exercise can disclose these requirements, such negative conditions already imply that there is no way to deduce preemptively an event that could satisfy these requirements, which, taken on their own, seem like a tall order. This is especially true if von Balthasar's own Christian conception of revelation is correct, according to which the claim that God is trinitarian love is a precise epistemological answer to the question "What evidence is there for the truth of divine revelation?" Setting aside for a moment von Balthasar's elaborate defense of this claim, it is highly implausible that the thread we have been following could lead us to this conclusion without already having Christianity in mind. For one, we would probably not expect that the theological formulation "God is love" could even serve as a viable candidate for an answer to the epistemological problem of revelation with which we began.

This last point requires further consideration, as it marks a final retroactive intensification of the aporia of revelation. To bring it into full relief, consider the following remarks from Romano Guardini on the God that Christianity purports to reveal:

> Der christliche Gott ist "der Gott Jesu Christi". Jener, den Jesus meint, wenn er sagt: "Mein Vater". Jener, von dem Jesus gesendet wird. Von dem her er lebt, und auf den hin er gerichtet ist. Gott ist Jener, welcher ist "der Gott und Vater Jesu Christi". Es ist nicht möglich, einen "christlichen Gottesgedanken", eine "christliche Wahrheit" vom konkreten Christus loszulösen. Was christliche Lehre ist, bleibt christlich nur, solange sie gleichsam aus Jesu Mund vernommen wird; solange sie lebendig aus ihm, aus seinem Sein und Tun verstanden wird. Es gibt kein von ihm abtrennbares—ich unterstreiche: von ihm abtrennbares, in einem freischwebenden Begriffssystem auszudrückendes "Wesen des Christentums." Das Wesen des Christentums ist Er. Das, was er ist; das, woraus er kommt und wohin er geht; das, was in ihm und um ihn her lebt—lebendig vernommen aus seinem Munde, abgelesen von seinem Antlitz. Hier ist dem philosophischen Geiste zugemutet, woran eigentlich bloße Philosophie zerbricht: Daß die endgültige Kategorie des Christlichen—und "Kategorie" bedeutet die Vorbedingung für alle Aussagen eines

> bestimmten Gegenstandsbereiches—, daß sie das Besondere, Einmalige der konkreten Persönlichkeit Jesu von Nazareth ist.[104]

Revelation, that is, does not consist in giving us complementary additions to a conception of God that we already have, a conception that would allow us to determine beforehand what would count as an admissible quality of God and what would not. It does not fill out a self-standing concept of "divinity" with a particular content but tells us for the first time what this concept is and what could count as a legitimate content for it to have. The problem, as it turns out, is deeper than being unable to determine an answer to the question of revelation; without reference to the theological resolution of the problem, we cannot even get a complete grasp on the terms of the question itself. If we were able to articulate the full scope of the question, we would also be able to produce the criteria that would constitute a satisfactory solution, even if a successful candidate for these criteria is absent.[105] But, if this were the case, we would find ourselves back in the position of a concept of revelation which submits itself to the strictures of finite human reason.

All of which brings to a head the question that has been looming in the background for the entire chapter: how can we say that revelation is rational if inherent to its very concept is a phenomenon that is free from any preemptive rational requirements that we could make of it? It seems that we are just a small step away from the conclusion that we simply have *no* grasp on the concept of revelation through rational reflection. If this is the case, however, we have failed to fulfil the minimal conception of revelation with which we began: it must establish something we can meaningfully call *knowledge* of God, which means that the relationship to God that comes through revelation must have some kind of affinity to our other uses of the term knowing.

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[104] Romano Guardini, *Christliches Bewußtsein*, 43-44.
[105] See the discussion in *Herrlichkeit I*, 447.

As we have seen, if there is some kind of continuity between reason and revelation, it could not be established by suggesting that the salient features of pedestrian reason are also on view in revelation; instead, we would have to say that the salient features of revelation are on view *in nuce* in pedestrian knowing itself. The reason why going in the reverse direction does not result in the same reduction of revelation to reason is once again the specific nature of the claim that Christian revelation makes: that God makes himself visible through the invisibility of love. To argue for analogous instances of this structure within reason would amount to claiming that reason, every bit as much as revelation, is essentially predicated upon some kind of unanticipated, pre-conceptual event whose truth is disclosed and warranted prior to its conceptual articulation. In other words, the same inability of reason to foresee and place restrictions upon revelation would have to play some constitutive role in *all* of reason's engagements with the world, and it is on account of this parallel that we would be entitled to say that revelation is "rational" and provides us with something we can recognize as knowledge:

> Man kann die Spannung im innerweltlichen Wissen bereits mit den Worten 'Wissen und Glauben' ausdrücken; das hat den Vorteil, zu zeigen, dass der Glaube an Gott (auf der zweiten Stufe), der christliche Glaube (auf der dritten) keineswegs ein radikal neues Phänomen darstellt, sondern in seiner Spannung zum religiösen und christlichen Wissen nur auf höherer Ebene die Struktur aller menschlichen Erkenntnis vollendet.[106]

Because the rationality that is common to reason and revelation would not be that of certainty, but rather the kind of rationality on view in phenomena that are inherently uncertain—that achieve their rationality by eluding, even thwarting our antecedent expectations—the rationalist threat that forecloses on the mere possibility of revelation is averted, or at least postponed.[107]

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[106] *Herrlichkeit I*, 429. The most economic discussion of this point occurs at *Herrlichkeit I*, 150-151, in which Balthasar employs Heideggerean terminology to argue that natural experience itself only occurs within the horizon of a pre-theoretical "attunement" or connaturality to that which transcends all experience, i.e. the unknown God.

[107] Cf. Marion's formulation: "But how do we conceive that at least *one* phenomenon could...render an invisible visible, an unseen which appears *as invisible*, and remains so? Can we accept the possibility of such a privilege?

All of this is to say that the possibility of revelation presumes a substantial set of commitments with respect to human rationality. In order for revelation to be possible, human reason must be *finite*: reason must not only be incapable of providing a philosophical account of revelation, but also a philosophical account of itself—at least not comprehensively. Reason, that is, must not be able to account for itself by conceptual philosophical reflection, because any attempt to do so would already presume what is supposed to be brought into view. Instead, an accurate account of reason would be a description of how all such attempted accounts run up against phenomenological data that cannot be accommodated by the terms set by account-giving reason. For reason and revelation to cohere, the category of finitude will have to be the animating principle of *all* human rationality, philosophical or religious.[108] And, to anticipate the following chapter, it will only be within the context of revelation that the full scope of this philosophical finitude—its logic and vindication—will become available to us. It is not enough, in other words, to simply say that reason is finite, that there are things that reason cannot know; an account of reason's finitude must itself be finite, limited, unable to get fully into view the finitude that it is attempting to delineate.

But with all of this I am getting ahead myself. It remains to be seen just what such a finite rationality would look like in the first place. For von Balthasar—following Erich Pryzwara's reading of Thomas Aquinas—this kind of finitude is most economically captured in the concept

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Probably, provided that we see in it not merely an exception, but rather the confirmation of a definition of every phenomenon in general," *Givenness and Revelation*, 5.

[108] As von Balthasar describes the point of departure for all rational reflection: "Commençons par une réflexion sur la situation de l'homme. Il existe comme un être limité dans un monde limité, mais sa raison est ouverte à l'illimité, à tout être; la preuve consiste dans la connaissance de sa finitude, de sa contingence...Les essences sont limitées, l'être ne l'est pas. Cette scission, la 'réelle' de saint Thomas, est la source de toute pensée religieuse et philosophie de l'humanité." Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Essai de résumer ma pensée," *Revue des Deux Mondes* (October 1988): 94-106, here 101.

of *analogy*. Reconstructing this finite analogical account of reason will be the topic of the

following chapter.

Chapter 2: Reason and Its Finitude

In the previous chapter, I argued that an account of divine revelation requires introducing categories such as "unknowable," "invisible," and "unforeseeable" in order to accommodate the unique claim of this phenomenon: to establish knowledge of God that we would not otherwise have access to. These requirements issued in the epistemological category that von Balthasar calls *Gestalt* (form, figure, or even shape), a species of knowledge parallel to that which occurs in aesthetic experience and human love. As we have seen, the reason that just these categories are necessary is because the truth of revelation cannot be proven through inferential reasoning, since attempting to do so would implicitly subordinate revelation to the capacities of human rationality. We cannot simply interrogate the rationality of the ostensible claims we are presented with in revelation by applying to them rational standards already in our possession in order to conclude whether the putative case of revelation is true or false. On the other hand, the concept of *Gestalt* is itself a term of art drawn from contemporary aesthetic theories, which seems to indicate that the qualities on view in revelation must already be available to us in some form independently of the role they play in this specific theological context. Von Balthasar readily acknowledges such parallels between natural reason and divine revelation. Far from separating the two, he devotes a great deal of energy to arguing that revelation completes and perfects our natural mode of knowing to such an extent as to say, "daß das Endgeheimnis der Kenosis Gottes in Christo analogisch angelegt ist im metaphysischen Geheimnis des Seins: das lichtet nur,

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[1] Gregory of Nyssa, *De opificio hominis* XI.4, in *Patrologia Graeca*, ed. Jacques Paul Migne (Paris: 1857-1886), 44:156b.

indem es nichtet, das den Glanz des Göttlichen nur vermittelt, indem es vorausweist auf die äußerste Demut des Kreuzes."[2]

It is on the basis of such a paralellism that, when Erich Przywara sets out to offer a similar phenomenology of divine revelation, he feels no need to offer an extensive account of why an inferential account would be inadequate based on requirements internal to the concept of revelation.[3] For Przywara, the fact that the truth of revelation cannot be demonstrated by establishing its correspondence with rational criteria we already possess is simply "die notwendige Folge aus dem *alles begründenden* 'von Gott her,' das in einer übernatürlichen Heilsordnung *nur verstärkt ist*."[4] This statement involves two claims. First, the relationship between God and knowledge—and the paradoxes that come with it—is not an isolated topic restricted to the specific case of divine revelation ("in einer übernatürlichen Heilsordnung"), but is rather a fundamental issue underlying all acts of knowing ("aus dem alles begründenden 'von Gott her'"). Second, Przywara is rejecting a conclusion that would be easy to draw from our previous reflections on the concept of revelation. The inference that Przywara is unhappy with would conclude that the epistemic qualities on view in revelation are unique to the phenomenon of divine disclosure. On this view, terms such as "unknowability" would apply *only* to revelation, and they would be called for *only* because of what is involved in this specific kind of (historically based) knowledge of God. These epistemic categories, then, would not be relevant in our pedestrian experience of the world, which could be comprehensively understood through

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[2] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit III, 1.1*, 38.
[3] My discussion here will limit itself to the theme of rational finitude in its relation to divine revelation, which makes up only a single (if foundational) strand within Przywara's vast philosophical and theological corpus. For comprehensive treatments of Przywara's thought, see Julio Terán-Dutari, *Christentum und Metaphysik. Das Verhältnis beider in der Analogielehre Erich Przywaras* (Munich: Berchmanskolleg Verlag, 1973) and Eva-Maria Faber, *Finden, um zu suchen. Der philosophisch-theologische Weg von Erich Przywara* (Münster: Aschendorff Verlag, 2020).
[4] Przywara, *Religionsphilosophie katholischer Theologie*, 449; emphasis added.

the ways of knowing that we specifically determined to be inadequate for describing knowledge in the case of revelation (inductive inference, deductive reasoning, etc.). The motivation behind such a position is obvious: *something* has to be different and new about revelation in order for it to be as unique as it says it is. Indeed, the epistemic structure that we observed to be required for revelation first gained traction by emphasizing the fact that revelation would have to consist in a special kind of knowledge that is somehow different from normal knowledge. Although Przywara is at equal pains to preserve the singular character of revelation, he wants to avoid concluding from this that quotidian experience does *not* exhibit any version of the features we have seen to be essential to revelation. Przywara's claim is just the opposite: the qualities of revelation (unforeseeable, self-authorizing, etc.) are likewise in some form characteristic of *all* human knowledge.

The claim that our use of reason in ordinary confrontations with the world bears some parallel to the knowledge of God that is established through divine revelation is a central aspect of the philosophical position that Przywara and von Balthasar want to defend under the name *analogia entis*, the analogy of being.[5] The first aim of their account is to show that the

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[5] The history and theological meaning of this term are even more complicated than in the case of revelation. The expression "analogy" was already deployed in a philosophical context by Plato and Aristotle, and later took on a specifically theological significance in Paul. On the pre-Christian origin of analogy as a philosophical term, see Pierre Aubenque, "Les origines de la doctrine de l'analogie de l'être: Sur l'histoire d'un contresens," in *Problèmes aristotéliciens I: Philosophie théorique* (Paris: Librairie philosophique J. Vrin, 2009), 239-250. Although the widespread acceptance of "analogy" as a technical expression was not established until well into the scholastic period, the term itself regularly appears throughout the first millennium of Christian thought; see, for instance Wolfgang Marcus, "Zur religionsphilosophischen Analogie in der frühen Patristik," *Philosophisches Jahrbuch* 67 (1959): 143-170. Matters are further complicated by the countless debates surrounding details of the term in the first half of the twentieth century, comprising an intricate exchange of essays, books, and lectures on the part of such figures as Romano Guardini, Gottlieb Söhngen, Josef Pieper, Emil Brunner, Karl Barth, Martin Heidegger, Gustav Siewerth, and Ferdinand Ulrich; for an overview of this context, see Bernhard Gertz, *Glaubenswelt als Analogie. Die theologische Analogie-Lehre Erich Przywaras und ihr Ort in der Auseinandersetzung um die analogia fidei* (Düsseldorf: Patmos-Verlag, 1969). Przywara himself contends that the position he is defending is present in all of its essentials in the writings of Thomas Aquinas, even though the latter never explicitly refers to an analogy "of being," an addition that becomes standardized only in the 16th century; see Julio Terán-Dutari, "Die Geschichte des Terminus 'Analogia entis' und das Werk Erich Przywaras," *Philosophisches Jahrbuch* 77 (1970): 163-179. Whether or not Przywara's account of analogy can rightfully be attributed to Thomas either *de dicto* or *de re* is controversial on both theoretical and historical grounds; on these issues, see Ralph M. McInerny, *Aquinas and Analogy*

experience of God in revelation is continuous with our other claims and beliefs in such a way

that it merits the title of knowledge. Given everything discussed so far, however, whatever

parallel we find between natural knowledge of the world and supernatural knowledge of

revelation will have to be drawn in such a way that this congruence does not undermine the

autonomy of divine self-disclosure. As we have already seen, this would be the case if our

account of reason would allow thought to somehow dictate or deduce ahead of time what

revelation would have to consist in, resulting in some version of rationalism that precludes a

coherent concept of revelation. Secondly, then, this account of human rationality will have to

provide an explanation of the continuity between our ordinary engagement with the world and

the unique knowledge that occurs in divine revelation, without disqualifying the fundamental

character of the latter, its legislation of its own conditions of intelligibility.

This chapter will discuss the account of reason that von Balthasar and Przywara think is

capable of simultaneously satisfying both of these demands. This will first require a broad sketch

of how these thinkers conceive of an analogy of being and the commitments that are involved in

this understanding of human rationality.[6] The point here will be to trace the aspects of this

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(Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1996); and Vincent Holzer, "L''analogie de l'être' dans sa relation à la 'différence ontologique': Métamorphose contemporaine d'une notion théologique," *PATH* 14 (2015): 203-229. Nevertheless, these issues are not immediately relevant for the purposes of this chapter. Once again, my investment in these thinkers and their terminology is entirely at the service of bringing into view the independent problematic of the nature of rationality presupposed by the concept of divine revelation.

[6] This is not to say that von Balthasar and Przywara advocate identical accounts of analogy. Indeed, both their published work and personal correspondence express recurring uncertainty regarding the extent to which their respective positions coincide on this all-important topic; see, for instance, von Balthasar's criticisms of Przywara in his editorial preface to Erich Przywara, *Vier Predigten über das Abendland* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1948), 7-8, and Przywara's remarks in Przywara, *In und Gegen*, 277-278. As I hope to show in the coming pages, however, both thinkers are in essential agreement regarding the nature of reason vis-à-vis divine revelation. By far the most extensive treatment of von Balthasar's relationship with Przywara is to be found in Manfred Lochbrunner, *Hans Urs von Balthasar und seine Theologenkollegen. Sechs Beziehungsgeschichten* (Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 2009), 17-146. Systematically oriented treatments of the differences between the two can be found in: Georges de Schrijver, *Le meveilleux accord de l'homme et de Dieu. Étude de l'analogie de l'être chez Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1983), 282-288; James V. Zeitz, "Przywara and von Balthasar on Analogy," *The Thomist* 52, no. 3 (1988): 473-498; Peter Casarella, "Hans Urs von Balthasar, Erich Przywara's *Analogia entis*, and the Problem of a Catholic *Denkform*," in *Analogy of Being: Invention of the Antichrist or the Wisdom of God?*, ed. Thomas Joseph White (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdman's, 2011), 192-206; and Eva-Maria Faber, "Künder der

account of knowledge that exhibit the structures that we have seen to be essential to the

phenomenon of divine revelation.[7] I will then discuss how von Balthasar and Przywara think we

should understand the relationship between supernatural and natural knowledge. The issue here

is how we should think of the purport of divine revelation to somehow fulfill human knowledge,

to provide a final response to the questions that philosophy poses for itself but is incapable of

answering. The final section will discuss the most important implication of the idea of analogy

for philosophical reflection on human reason. It will turn out to be essential to Przywara's

account that, just as reason cannot determine in advance what God will reveal himself to be, so

too reason will be unable to determine exhaustively what *reason* is, even abstracting from the

paradoxes involved in the case of divine revelation. This section will consider just what

Przywara believes thought can determine about itself through philosophical reflection at all,

given that he rejects that it can determine itself exhaustively. [8]

      Before jumping in, however, it is necessary to clarify a handful of terminological issues.

In effect, the topic of this chapter is the relationship between philosophy and theology. The

distinction between these two domains is epistemological, in that it concerns the kind of ground

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lebendigen Nähe des unbegreiflichen Gottes. Hans Urs von Balthasar und sein 'Mentor' Erich Przywara," in *Die Kunst Gottes verstehen. Hans Urs von Balthasars theologische Provokationen*, ed. Magnus Striet and Jan-Heiner Tück (Freiburg: Herder, 2005), 384-409.

[7] Once again, the position that will be defended here—that the parallel between revelation and quotidian knowledge is located in the common breakdown of conceptual thought—is a controversial one among even Catholic theologians. For an extensive criticism of this kind of approach, see Lorenz B. Puntel, *Analogie und Geschichtlichkeit. Philosophiegeschichtlich-kritischer Versuch über das Grundproblem der Metaphysik* (Freiburg: Herder Verlag, 1969), as well as his "Eine fundamentale und umfassende Kritik der Denkrichtung Jean-Luc Marions," in *Jean-Luc Marion. Studien zum Werk*, ed. Hanna-Barbara Gerl-Falkoviz, (Dresden: Verlag Text und Dialog, 2013), 47-101.

[8] A historical qualification is necessary here. The doctrine of analogy has traditionally been associated with and developed in the context of the problem of the applicability of human language to God, a topic known in Christian tradition as the question of the Divine Names, which I will not be discussing here at any length. This is in part because it is not the animating issue for Przywara, but more importantly because the notion of rational finitude seems to me to be the topic of greatest philosophical interest in the doctrine of analogy generally speaking. Jean-Luc Marion, with whom I sympathize on this issue, suggests that the entire approach of posing the question in terms of which qualities can be adequately predicated of God is at best inherently misleading, and at worst a grave rationalist misconception of God; see Jean-Luc Marion, "De la 'mort de Dieu' aux noms divins: l'itinéraire théologique de la métaphysique," *Laval théologique et philosophique* 41, no. 1 (1985): 25-41.

appealed to as a justification for knowledge. The deciding factor here is not the content of a claim, but its origin: an argument is theological if the final basis of its truth consists in an appeal to divine revelation. To use an example of St. Thomas, the Christian theory of God as the Holy Trinity falls under the heading of theology because, without the revelation of Christian scripture, philosophical speculation would never produce a compelling reason to entertain the possibility of—let alone justify—this Christian conception of divinity.[9] The notion of the Trinity is theological in nature because the justification for its truth derives from divine revelation, not because it is a claim concerning God. A claim's being about God does not suffice to make it a properly theological claim, and, conversely, a claim need not explicitly concern God in order to fall within the purview of theology.[10] By the same token, there is no inherent reason why strictly philosophical reflection—reflection, that is, which relies only on the natural capacities of reason, without appealing to divine revelation to warrant its conclusions—could not consider God with respect to what natural reason is capable of knowing of him, without taking into account any information obtained through revelation.

It is important to note an implication of this distinction that will be feature prominently in the third part of this chapter. Since the theological mode of knowing relies on knowledge that is revealed to us in history by God himself in a way that reason could neither anticipate nor deduce, theological conclusions would be accessible only to those privy to the content and veracity of this event of revelation. Anyone who is unfamiliar with the doctrines of Christianity, for example, or who believes that its claim to divine establishment is false, will have no reason to

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[9] Thomas Aquinas, *Super boetium de trinitate*, pars 1 q. 1 a. 4, Thomas Aquinas, *S. Thomae de Aquino Opera omnia*.

[10] Thomas is at pains to say throughout the first question of the *Summa Theologiae* that this entails that certain concepts can be entertained under both a philosophical and a theological aspect: while it is possible derive them as conclusions of consistent rational reflection, they can also be held to be true by virtue of the fact that they are revealed to be so in sacred scripture. See *S. Th.* I, q. 1 a. 3, which mentions angels, material creatures, and morality as examples of such concepts that can be known by appealing to either revelation or reason.

accept the claim that God is a Trinity. Philosophical knowledge, on the other hand, which

purports to demonstrate its claims through the innate activity of reason itself, relies on nothing

other than rational reflection to propose, contest, defend, revise, and accept the claims that fall

within its purview. This means that in philosophy, in contrast to theology, it remains wholly

within the power of reason to stand judge over the positions it puts forward. Whereas reason is

completely incapable of even approaching theology on the basis of its natural resources,

whatever is in the domain of philosophy can be examined by reason and only reason.

A final note about the use of expressions like "philosophy," "rational reflection,"

"reason," "thought," and so forth. I am using these terms to distinguish between rational

processes that respond to questions which are essentially an issue of empirical confirmation

(questions like "How many eligible voters turned out in the last election?" "What is the chemical

structure of protein?") from those which engage questions along the lines of "What are the

conditions of a satisfying human life?" "What is art?" "What constitutes a state?" We do not

arrive at answers to the latter set of questions through empirical observation (as if we could give

a satisfactory account of what a state is by offering detailed descriptions of factually existing

governmental structures), but we still expect them to tell us something true about the world, to

have normative force—or at least this is our intuitive expectation when we set about asking such

questions. We look for philosophical explanations to provide us with knowledge about how

things are, but in a way that the guarantor of such knowledge is thought itself, not the procuring

of a verifiable fact of the matter. It is this distinctively philosophical kind of reasoning that is at

stake for Przywara and von Balthasar, albeit at the highest level of abstraction. Moreover, their

target is not any single philosophical "issue," but philosophical reflection as such, an account of

the conditions involved in any such process of philosophical account-giving.[11] It is this specific

dimension of philosophy, reason's interrogation and account of itself, in which I am interested in

this chapter.[12]

Rational Finitude and Revelation

All of this will first require a rough sketch of what von Balthasar and Przywara take the

salient features of knowledge in general to be, independently of any commitments required in the

specific case of divine revelation. Consider von Balthasar's terminology in the following

description of human knowledge:

> Die Dinge sind nicht nur enthüllt, sie sind immer und bis zuletzt ebenso wesenhaft
> verhüllt. Diese Verhüllung bedeutet naturgemäß eine Begrenzung ihrer Enthüllung
> aber nicht notwendig eine Begrenzung ihrer Wahrheit. Denn die Verhüllung stellt
> sich der Enthüllung nicht einfach wie eine von außen begrenzende Schranke
> entgegen, sondern vielmehr wie eine der Enthüllung selbst einwohnende Form oder
> Eigenschaft. Die Dinge sind tatsächlich als verhüllte enthüllt, und in dieser Gestalt
> werden sie zum Gegenstand der Erkenntnis.[13]

Von Balthasar's use of these Heideggerean terms to describe the essential features of any act of

knowing bears obvious parallels to his account of knowledge of God in particular. As emerged in

the previous chapter, the way that God reveals himself in revelation is to make himself known *as*

unknowable; in the terms of the passage cited here, God reveals himself *by* concealing himself,

albeit in a way that this concealing takes on a specific content. (God's concealing is not a "pure"

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[11] These formulations are borrowed from Robert Pippin's description of Hegel's *Science of Logic*. My suggestion in this chapter is that Przywara's argument in *Analogia entis* takes place on the same level as Hegel's project in that book. The decisive division between Hegel and Przywara is that Hegel believes such an endeavor can be successfully completed, while Przywara believes he can show that reason's attempts to give an account of itself can only be completed at the cost of mistaken question-begging assumptions. In this position, of course, Przywara stands in a long line of thinkers in what has come to be called the continental tradition of philosophy. On the issues involved here, see Robert Pippin, "Idealism and Anti-Idealism in Modern European Thought," *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 33, no. 3 (2019): 349-367.

[12] Przywara's reflections on this issue, that the *analogia entis* is not one rational exercise or philosophical investigation among others, but an account of the *form* of all knowing whatsoever, come only at the end of *Analogia entis* as a conclusion that emerges from reflecting on what exactly has been shown in the course of the book. See Erich Przywara, *Analogia entis. Metaphysik. Ur-Struktur und All-Rhythmus*, 3rd ed. (Freiburg: Johannes Verlag Einsiedeln, 1996), 203-208.

[13] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theologik I*, 234.

concealing, in the sense that we do not perceive it at all; we perceive the *way* in which God reveals himself to be unknowable.) The claim of the text just cited is that this mutual interplay of disclosure and concealment is already typical of knowledge before revelation or talk of God even comes into the picture. Understanding why von Balthasar and Przywara take this to be the case requires some unpacking, and the most explicit and sustained engagement with this problem occurs in Przywara's 1932 study *Analogia entis*.

Przywara's claim in the book is that a consistent investigation of human philosophical reflection will issue in two conclusions: first, human reason is inherently *finite*, where this means that philosophical reflection is incapable of giving an account of its own conditions of possibility; and, second, we ought to conceive of this finitude in terms that are, in a broad sense, *theological*. His argument is that all knowledge rests on an implicit reference to a divine creator about whom nothing can be properly said—at least from a philosophical standpoint—beyond the fact that he is other than the creature. Because this relationship underlies every act of knowing, and because our ignorance of God prevents us from determining the exact nature of the relationship itself, philosophical thought always runs on an explanatory deficit, an inability to account for its own power of account-giving. Such, at any rate, is the central thesis of *Analogia entis*.

The book's method consists in analyzing a series of positions that lay claim to a kind of explanatory self-sufficiency, and, in each instance, arguing that the case in point fails to live up to this claim by demonstrating its reliance on conceptual resources that it cannot supply itself. Take a typical case, in which Przywara considers whether philosophy is concerned with matters of an essentially *a priori* or *a posteriori* nature.[14] The point of departure in this case is a putative

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[14] *Analogia entis*, 36-60.

question (in this case, "What is the object of philosophical reflection?") that seems to admit of a limited set of mutually exclusive answers ("the *a priori*" or "the *a posteriori*"). Posing the question in this way makes it appear that the philosophical enterprise consists in adjudicating between these two supposedly incompatible alternatives. Setting up the problem as this kind of dichotomy, however, is where Przywara thinks all of the problems begin. On his view, we can only resolve the conceptual problem on the terms thus posed by mistakenly attributing to one of the alternatives an explanatory self-sufficiency that it is not actually entitled to. Because answering the question in favor of one side of the dichotomy entails this kind of category mistake, any resolution along these lines will prove to be unsatisfactory, irrespective of which side of the pair is endorsed.

For instance, in the case in question, Przywara takes it to be self-evident that the kind of knowledge philosophy is after is essentially *a priori* knowledge. The kinds of questions that philosophy asks—e.g., what is truth? what should count as art?—do not call for answers that take the form of an *a posteriori* description, but demand a normative response that cannot be refuted by—because not derived from—empirical experience.[15] Even if it is clear that we are dealing with an essentially *a priori* exercise, however, Przywara believes that it is nonetheless impossible to think of philosophy in solely *a priori* terms. The reason he gives for this is that the philosophical enterprise can only emerge within the concrete standpoint of an empirical subject that cannot be derived within thought alone:

> *Weil* Grund und Ziel und Sinn als Hintergründe das 'Fragliche' sind, sind sie das Erfragte. *Weil* das konkret Seiende als Vordergrund das 'Selbstverständliche' ist, darum geht die Frage von ihnen weg. Sie werden dem Fragenden transparent: erst von ihrem einfachen Vorhandensein in ihr Erscheinen als begründet, gerichtet und bestimmt, dann durch dieses hindurch zu ihrem Grund und Ziel und Sinn. Als subjektive Methode erscheint von hier aus also ein 'Aus(-gehen) von' dem, was

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[15] "In diesem doppelten Sinn ist Metaphysik apriorisch, weil und insoweit sie auf dieses sachliche Prius des Seins sachlich geht," *Analogia entis*, 37.

sachlich 'nach' (dem Ersten) liegt: d. h. (subjektiv-methodische) *aposteriorische Metaphysik*.[16]

These formulations are not meant to challenge or deny the legitimacy of the *a priori* claims that result from philosophical reflection, contending instead that philosophy is an entirely *a posteriori* activity; as we have seen, Przywara thinks that the *a priori* dimension of philosophical knowledge is constitutive of what philosophy seeks to know in the first place. Instead, the passage reflects on the conditions under which *a priori* reflection takes place to begin with. The dimension of philosophy that Przywara is describing here is not particular to any individual philosophical account, but rather concerns what is involved in the act of such account-giving generally speaking. It is at this level of investigating the conditions under which philosophy takes place at all that the constitutive role played by the contingent *a posteriori* situation comes into play. In short, Przywara's claim in the above passage is that the act of reflection on *a priori* truths always emerges out of the situation of a contingent historical thinker, without which there would be no reason to engage in *a priori* reflection in the first place.[17] The distinctive intellectual practice of philosophical reflection only presents itself as an activity to be engaged in against the background of the concrete existence within which it is pursued, and it is only within such a concrete existence that the conditions for asking the philosophical question emerge, which entails that the unique circumstances of the philosopher (clearly a matter of *a posteriori* knowledge) likewise constitute an object of philosophical reflection. This singularity out of

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[16] *Analogia entis*, 37-38.

[17] This emphasis on the subsequent character of all theoretical thought to an irreducible empirical givenness is the central topic of Romano Guardini's early work *Der Gegensatz*. Compare what has been said here with the following passage: "Das Lebendig-Konkrete als solches kann durch Begriffe nicht erfaßt werden, denn sie richten sich ihrer Natur nach auf das Allgemeine. Das Konkrete bleibt für sie das 'Unaussprechbare.' Oder aber sie suchen es in ihre Ordnung hinüberzuziehen, lösen es in abstrakte Begriffsmerkmale auf und zerstören es so. Dem Konkret-Lebendigen gegenüber kommt nur eine Erkenntnisweise in Betracht, die auf dessen Sonderart eingestellt ist, eine irgendwie 'intuitive,'" Romano Guardini, *Der Gegensatz. Versuche zu einer Philosophie des lebendig Konkreten*, 3rd ed. (Mainz: Matthias Grünewald Verlag, 1985), 165.

which the philosophical act arises, moreover, cannot be described through a deductive *a priori* exercise—this is just what terms like singular and situation mean. So, even if Przywara admits the legitimacy of philosophy as a reflective activity in which thought yields *a priori* knowledge, the constitutive moment of the *a posteriori* situation at the foundation of philosophy entails that thought cannot give the same kind of account of *itself*, of the conditions of this kind of reflection, as it gives of, say, art or ethics. There are obviously many implications to adopting this Heideggerean position, but at this juncture Przywara's point is a minimal one: the *a priori* dimension of philosophical reflection can only understand itself out of a lived standpoint that is a singular fact. In other words, the *a posteriori* conditions under which such truth initially becomes available to thought with are part and parcel of the kind of endeavor that philosophy is. This means that the dichotomy with which we began is poorly posed: the concepts *a priori* and *a posteriori* are not exclusive, as it turns out, but reciprocal.[18]

In his summary of the results of this exercise, however, it is clear that Przywara thinks the philosophical stakes are higher than the conclusion that *a priori* and *a posteriori* are mutually determining concepts:

> Hierin spricht sich also ein Doppeltes aus. Einmal: daß die Fragestellung zwischen Apriori und Aposteriori unaufhaltsam in die Frage zwischen Absolut und Relativ durchbricht (als Vollendung der Art, wie dieselbe Frage auch durch die früheren Fragen durchbrach). Dann aber: *wie das Fehlgehen der extremen Lösungen gerade dadurch geschieht, daß sie diese letzte Frage mit sich selbst gleichsetzen* (als Vollendung der Art, wie schon früher die extremen Lösungen durch ihr Absolut-sein-Wollen unmöglich waren).[19]

The italicized portion of this passage expresses Przywara's retroactive diagnosis of the conceptual dynamic between the two terms, a dynamic he contends makes up the fundamental

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[18] Von Balthasar offers a similar assessment of the philosophical significance of the irreducibility of the singular fact in his earliest unpublished manuscript; see the reconstruction in Disse, *Metaphysik der Singularität.*
[19] *Analogia entis*, 62, emphasis added.

structure of philosophical questions in general. The claim is that that any one answer to the question (e.g. philosophy is an essentially *a priori* exercise) relies on an implicit appeal to the other answers, and Przywara's aim in the book is to make explicit this mutual reliance. In this case, that amounts to saying there is no logically consistent concept of "the *a priori*" taken in itself. Rather, inherent in the very notion of *a priori* is a conception of the *a posteriori*. No single candidate can serve as an adequate answer to the question in the way we had initially conceived, because all of the candidate responses are interdependent. Moreover, Przywara thinks that attempting to rephrase the question in new terms in order to arrive at a single, exhaustive explanation will only result in a new iteration of the same aporetic structure in which no candidate answer can account for itself without appealing to competing solutions. Demonstrating that *all* levels of human thought exhibit this conceptually aporetic dynamic is the task the book sets for itself. While much of the book is accordingly dedicated to conceptual and phenomenological exercises that aim to disclose the aporetic commitments that underly many familiar philosophical problems, Przywara's real aim with these reflections is to show that the absence of rational self-sufficiency is not a local case of explanatory inadequacy, but a constitutive feature of philosophical reflection itself.[20] The conclusion that Przywara wants to draw from this is that the categories that make up ostensible answers to our philosophical

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[20] Of course, the notion that this circular character is constitutive of the nature of philosophy is a point that makes good Heideggerian sense. In fact, certain sections in his Freiburg lectures could easily be mistaken for the passages in Przywara we have been looking at. For example: "Die Kreisbewegung der Philosophie hat ihr Wesentliches nicht im Entlanglaufen an einer Peripherie und im Zurückkommen auf die Ausgangsstelle, sondern in dem beim Kreisgang allein möglichen Blicken ins Zentrum. Dieses, d. h. die Mitte und der Grund, offenbart sich als Zentrum nur im und für ein Kreisen um es. Mit diesem Zirkelhaften des philosophierenden Denkens hängt seine Zweideutigkeit zusammen, die nicht zu beseitigen und noch weniger durch Dialektik auszugleichen ist. Es ist charakteristisch, daß wir in der Philosophie und ihrer Geschichte immer wieder, und zuletzt in großer und genialer Form, den Versuch finden, diese Zirkelhaftigkeit und Zweideutigkeit des philosophischen Denkens auszugleichen auf dem Wege einer Dialektik. Alle Dialektik in der Philosophie aber ist der Ausdruck einer Verlegenheit," Martin Heidegger, *Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik. Welt, Endlichkeit, Einsamkeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1983), 276.

problems are incapable of providing the satisfactory rational account that we are looking for.[21]

That is, human reason is finite: it poses for itself philosophical questions that its own powers of

discursive reasoning are incapable of resolving.

All of this is to say that thought *cannot account for its own conditions of intelligibility*. It

is this insight, rather than a solution to some specific philosophical question, that Przywara

thinks is the most significant result to emerge from his investigation. Take the following passage,

in which Przywara characterizes the essential form of philosophical speculation, a structure that

underlies every particular act of knowing and that only becomes fully clear after thinking

philosophy through to the end:

> Hierin aber haben wir die formalste Grundlegung einer "kreatürlichen
> Metaphysik"… Sie ist kreatürlich,…weil sie werdehaft in Rück- und Vor-
> beziehung verläuft (und nicht in Trennung selbstgenugsamer Einheiten). Diese
> "kreatürliche Metaphysik" ist die Metaphysik, die immanent aus dem formalsten
> Problem von Metaphysik überhaupt sich ergibt.[22]

Leaving aside for the moment Przywara's characterization of philosophy as "creaturely

metaphysics," consider the opposition at the center of this passage. At the culmination of its

attempt to provide an account of its own possibility, philosophy does not result in fixed

propositions, "self-sufficient unities," or final conclusions in the way of transparent conceptual

formulations. Instead, this final standpoint of speculation is is described in terms of movement

and becoming, as an interminable circle of reciprocal references that never reaches a stable

philosophical account of the world. (I will be returning later to why Przywara thinks that *this*

state of affairs should be a reason to understand the philosophical enterprise as a whole in terms

of "creation.") By failing to arrive at such an account, philosophical reflection fails to satisfy the

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[21] On this point, see also the discussion in Erich Przywara, *Kant Heute* (Munich and Berlin: Verlag von R. Oldenbourg, 1930), 103-105.
[22] *Analogia entis*, 28.

underlying aspiration behind any particular instance of rational reflection: a satisfactory

philosophical account of all account giving.[23] This, of course, is not to deny the legitimacy of

rational explanation altogether, but only to claim that the process of such explanation cannot

itself be transparently accounted for without remainder. It is in attempting to do so that we

encounter the rational limitations that the book is supposed to draw our attention to.

Przywara describes this situation of rational limitation by saying that "Das geschöpfliche

Bewußtsein erlebt den 'absoluten Fixpunkt' seiner Einheit jenseits über sich." [24] The unity of

thought, the conditions under which philosophical reflection is possible, will always remain

beyond the resources of thought itself.[25] Or, put simply, human thought is inherently *finite*. Of

course, at this point, there is nothing in this talk of limitations that immediately invokes religious

concepts, much less Przywara's ultimate claim that experience is only possible through an

implicit reference to a divine creator whose nature cannot be grasped by the innate capacities of

human reason. Understanding this transition to a theological register will first require saying

something about what Przywara takes the finitude of knowledge to consist in.

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[23] Cf. Romano Guardini: "Sinn der Erkenntnis ist der Vollzug der absoluten Gültigkeit. Dem Absolutheitsanspruch kann aber durch den Vollzug im endlichen Akt nicht Genüge geschehen. Zum Wesen der endlichen Erkenntnis gehört, daß sie weiß, wie Erkenntnis sein müßte, um sich wirklich zu erfüllen, aber nicht dahin gelangen kann. Das Erkennen des endlichen Wesens übersteigt mit der eigenen Forderung das eigene Vermögen. Sobald es den Akt der Erkenntnis unter dem ganzen Gewicht der bewußt gewordenen Forderung vollziehen soll, vermag es das nur gleichsam in einer Überspringung der eigenen Möglichkeit, indem es sich ahnend auf etwas beruft, das über ihm liegt. Dieses Erkennen kann sich nie endgültig beruhigen, weil sein Wahrheitsvollzug nicht rein in sich ruht. Es ist nicht vollendet; strebt noch über sich hinaus. So hinterläßt es eine Unruhe, die noch nach endgültiger Vergewisserung verlangt," Romano Guardini, *Die Bekehrung des Aurelius Augustinus. Der innere Vorgang in seinen Bekenntnissen*, 2nd ed. (Munich: Kösel-Verlag, 1950), 123.
[24] *Religionsphilosophie*, 409. Cf. Guardini: "…der Mensch [existiert] nicht als geschlossener Wirklichkeitsblock oder selbstgenugsame, sich aus sich selbst heraus entwickelnde Gestalt, sondern zum Entgegenkommenden hinüber," Romano Guardini, *Welt und Person. Versuche zur christlichen Lehre vom Menschen*, 2nd ed. (Abt. Die Burg: Werkbund-Verlag Würzburg, 1939), viii.
[25] Von Balthasar puts the same thought this way: "Ist nun auch…alle Idealität und alles Sollen…durchaus in der Realität und im Sein fundiert, so entsteht die Bewegung und lebendige Gespanntheit doch wesentlich aus einem Ausstand, einem Mangel und darum einem Über-sich-Hinausdrängen dieser Realität. Um zu sein und zu bleiben, muß sie werden; werden, was sie ist und werdend doch noch nicht ist; um sich zu erhalten, muß sie streben, und strebend muß sie ihr eigenes Gesetz erfüllen," Hans urs von Balthasar, "Merkmale des Christlichen," in *Verbum Caro. Skizzen zur Theologie I*, (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1960), 172-194, here 175.

To begin with, the limits of our rational capacities, as expressed in their reliance on conditions that transcend categories of thought, cannot be expressed in a concept that adequately captures the nature of such transcendence. If this were the case, then we would not really have arrived at any kind of meaningful transcendence of reason at all, since this very transcendence would turn out to be itself subject to—because graspable by—the standards of human reason. As with any position that involves an appeal to the essentially unthinkable, the difficulty here is how to grasp and convey meaningfully whatever it is that supposedly transcends reason, without thereby inadvertently demonstrating that the issue at hand is perfectly thinkable after all. Przywara's attempt to resolve this difficulty is to say that this unthinkability is not something that we know, strictly speaking, but rather something that we experience:

> Damit wird das Eigene des katholischen Transzendenztypus von selbst klar. Denn die "Transzendenz," die er einbeschließt, ist wesenhaft nicht *gesetzte* Transzendenz, sondern als vorliegend *erfahrene* Transzendenz. Sie ist nicht sozusagen Transzendenz "von unten her,"…sondern wesenhaft Transzendenz "von oben her"…[26]

The "Transzendenz" disclosed in the course of his investigation is not a clearly formed concept that is produced by deductive argumentation, but a strictly descriptive account of the available phenomenological data. The final stage Przywara wants us to reach—the point at which thought exhausts its explanatory resources—does not consist in seeing "beyond" where account giving stops and then recognizing that our rational capacities fall short of this "beyond." Przywara's claim is that the finitude that emerges in the course of the book should not be thought of as a limit to *our* reason, but quality internal to what discursive reasoning *is*. It is not the case that our minds simply aren't powerful enough to have a certain kind of knowledge (although they could

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[26] *Religionsphilosophie*, 413-414.

be in principle); rather, the unknowable here is unknowable in the sense that such unknowability

is an essential element of what we are running up against.[27]

Introducing the thought of the essentially unknowable, which Przywara here introduces

into the heart of philosophy, echoes the characterizations of God that emerged earlier in chapter

one, and thereby brings us closer to the theological implications Przywara wants to draw from

his conception of finitude. The use of such formulations further makes clear that knowledge of

God acquired through philosophical reflection will not come in the form of a concept or

proposition. Przywara thinks that what we really recognize is not God, but our own non-divinity,

a recognition that emerges from the fact that conceptual knowledge breaks down at a certain

point:

> Dann aber ist es ein positives Nicht-Aufgehen: die Lebendigkeitsfülle der
> göttlichen Unendlichkeit, die sowenig einen "Begriff Gottes" (als "Selbst-Begriff
> Gottes") über sich hat, daß sie "als" diese Unendlichkeit der wahre Selbst-Begriff
> Gottes ist. Hier ist es nicht so, daß ein geformtes $\pi \acute{\varepsilon} \rho \alpha \varsigma$ in ein chaotisches $\ddot{\alpha} \pi \varepsilon \iota \rho o \nu$
> abstürzt. Sondern: ein positives $\ddot{\alpha} \pi \varepsilon \iota \rho o \nu$ als Ewiges Leben ist das eigentliche $\pi \acute{\varepsilon} \rho \alpha \varsigma$
> der Form.[28]

The knowledge that we acquire of God through the breakdown of philosophical reflection

consists in the negative insight that we are *other than* God.[29] What is at stake in Przywara's

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[27] See the entire discussion in *Religionsphilosophie*, 413f., especially: "Damit aber ist die Transzendenz grundlegend in keiner Weise eine Funktion des denkenden Erkennens, sondern eher…seine sozusagen 'gegebene Grenze.' D. h. das reflexive, analysierende oder synthetisierende denkende Erkennen wird der eigentlichen Transzendenz Gottes nicht so sehr inne im Verlauf eines 'Erschließens' Gottes, als in der Erfahrung Seines letzten 'Sich-Verschließens,'" 414.

[28] *Analogia entis*, 90.

[29] None of this should be taken to imply that Przywara means to reject the established Catholic position that it is possible to make positive attributive statements about God along the lines of the traditional tripartite division of theological knowledge into the *via positiva*, *via negativa*, and *via ementiae*. Przywara contends that such positive statements about God's goodness, justice, and so forth are perfectly sound, but that the way these statements express the truth they do is by conveying the difference between God and the world, rather than bringing us to understand God through a definition: "In dieser Formel liegt erstens, daß hier alle noch 'zumessende' Analogie (*analogia attributionis*) sich in eine ungreifbare 'schwebende' Analogie (*analogia proportionis*) reduziert. Eine positive Aussage über Gott besteht gewiß, aber ist nur die Fundierung der negativen Aussage über Sein schlechthinniges Anderssein," *Analogia entis*, 135. See also the discussion in Erich Przywara, *Was ist Gott? Eine Summula*, 2nd ed. (Nuremberg: Glock und Lutz Verlag, 1953), 29-32. A concise summary in the issues involved here can be found in

arguments is not so much a claim about God as a claim about ourselves, or, more specifically, our limitations.[30] God enters into the picture through Przywara's claim that rational finitude achieves adequate expression in the theological category of creation, suggesting that the insight into rational finitude is really the insight that human knowledge is essentially "creaturely" knowledge. The term "God" in this context does not operate as a concept or definition, but as the negation of the finite conditions under which human thought operates.[31] This strictly negative idea of God is, of course, so abstract and contains so little content that it is not entirely clear why we should bring in the idea of God at all at this juncture, or whether employing this term is sufficiently meaningful to add anything to our understanding of the insight at which we have arrived.[32] As we shall see shortly, Przywara accepts the legitimacy of these worries, and admits that the theological connection can only be fully drawn if the relevant facts of Christian revelation are already on table. Assuming for the moment, however, that Przywara can make good on the claim that theological terms are implied by the nature of rational finitude, then, if the

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Vincent Holzer, "Métamorphoses contemporaines de la raison théologique. L'aiguillon de l'analogie," *Archivio di Filosofia* 84, no. 3 (2016): 265-278, especially 274-276.

[30] Hence Przywara's frequent insistence that the "analogy of being" is not a philosophical axiom from which we can derive further claims, but instead a description of the form of all rational account giving: "Ich habe bereits in dem großen Religionsgespräch mit Karl Barth in Münster 1928 scharf betont, daß aus einer 'analogia entis' sich nichts ableiten lasse…Soll eine 'analogia entis'…'katholisches Grund-Prinzip' sein, dann niemals als 'Prinzip,' sondern als 'durchgehende Struktur eines rein frei Faktischen,'" *In und Gegen*, 276.

[31] Kenneth Oakes puts it nicely: "…the knowledge of God, even only the knowledge of God as the beginning and end of all things, does not signify a positive epistemological achievement or capture, or the mere addition of one fact to an already lengthy catalogue of facts. Instead, the knowledge of God as *principium et finis* presents more of a deprivation, rendering the whole of creation more mysterious, upsetting any notions of metaphysical progress or certitude, and opening up epistemologies to new and unfamiliar realms," Kenneth R. Oakes, "Three Themes in Przywara's Early Theology," *The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review* 74, no. 2 (2010): 283-310, here 297.

[32] Cf. Brian Davies's helpful description of what we should understand by Thomas Aquinas's idea of a philosophical doctrine of God: "Aquinas is famous for having a 'doctrine' of God. Yet one might equally say that he is a kind of agnostic, though not in the usual sense of the word as employed with respect to God. The theistic agnostic typically says 'We do not know, and the universe is a mysterious riddle.' And this is not Aquinas's view exactly. Yet he does want to say that the universe is a riddle and that we do not understand what the answer to it is. He gives the name 'God' to the answer, and he thinks that, if there were no God, there would be no mysterious universe and nobody to be mystified. But he does not take this conclusion as putting an end to further questions: he takes it as an invitation to ask many more. His arguments for the existence of God are arguments to show that there are real questions to which we do not and cannot know the answer," Brian Davies, *Aquinas* (London and New York: Continuum, 2002), 235-236.

project of *Analogia entis* is successful in showing that such finitude is an essential quality of *all* knowledge, he will be justified in concluding that an implicit relationship to the divine is a structuring principle of human thought in general.[33]

At this point, it becomes possible to sketch the broad outline of the solution that von Balthasar and Przywara will propose to the problem that remained at the end of the last chapter regarding how the unique kind of knowledge called for by divine revelation relates to other non-theological cases of human knowledge. In light of this admittedly cursory summary of Przywara's argument, the meaning of passages like the one cited at the beginning of this section begins to become clear, and, with it, the nature of the parallel between pedestrian knowledge and revelation on the basis of which Przywara and von Balthasar will contend that our relation to the claims made in revelation should be understood as one of knowledge. When von Balthasar describes human knowledge by saying, "Hier erscheint wirklich und buchstäblich das Geheimnis als Geheimnis: gerade das Enthülltsein des Seins ist als solches seine tiefe Verhüllung," he is claiming that, like revelation, every act of knowing is possible only against the background of non-discursive conditions that discursive reasoning can never get into view,[34] and Przywara's account of the finite structure of reason provides an approach to how it could be possible to make good on this claim.

Central to this argument is the claim that the revealing-in-concealment dynamic of human knowledge can be philosophically demonstrated—at least in broad terms—independently of any

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[33] Here is Thomas Pfau's formulation of this point: "Crucially, the *analogia* model posits that visible phenomena are not only formally related to the invisible as the metaphysical source of their existence, but that by their distinctive mode of appearance they also actively participate in their divine source," Thomas Pfau, "On Catholic Responses to Our Devastated *Saeculum*," *Nova et vetera* 18, no. 1 (2020): 29-53, here 40. Pfau's article is a helpful survey of the 20th-century theological atmosphere in which the concept of analogy came to play such an important philosophical role.

[34] *Theologik I*, 235.

Christian theological considerations.[35] The objection to von Balthasar's account of revelation that remained at the end of the previous chapter arose out of the anxiety that the epistemic conditions necessary to account for the special instance of divine revelation—the impossibility of a complete conceptual account of the phenomenon, an event that achieves intelligibility precisely in giving itself to be known as unknowable, etc.—would mark a departure from the conditions that characterize the ordinary conditions of knowing. If the phenomenon of revelation were simply and entirely "other" than the quotidian phenomena with which we are familiar, then there would be no way to integrate the experience we have of it with our other beliefs and claims. In light of the account of reason just outlined, however, it is clear that Przywara and von Balthasar believe that this is not the case. As unique a phenomenon as it is, the fact that revelation cannot be captured in terms of deductive inferential reasoning does not mean that it contradicts our categories of knowledge. To the contrary, Przywara is everywhere at pains to claim that it exhibits in a paradigmatic mode the general dynamic of knowing in all of its manifestations. This is clear, for instance, in the following passage comparing the aporias that appear in strictly philosophical reflection about God with those that emerge in Christian theology:

> Fragerichtung und Lösungsrichtung des Gottesproblems sind bereits Fragerichtung und Lösungsrichtung des Christusproblems. Denn, was im Gottesproblem die entscheidende Grundstruktur war, die Spannung zwischen Immanenz, Inne-Sein, und Transzendenz, Über-Sein Gottes, ist im Christusproblem im Grunde nur gesteigert.[36]

As it turns out, natural knowledge in its independent exercise evinces a disclosure-in-concealment character that is an inchoate reflection of the epistemic structure made explicit in the case of divine revelation.: "Damit aber enthüllt sich ein Grundaspekt katholischer Religion in seinem verborgenen Sinn: ihre 'gewöhnliche Menschlichkeit,' d. h. die seltsame *Verhülltheit des*

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[35] See the entire discussion in *Theologik I*, 233-243.
[36] Przywara, *Gott*, 282.

Übernatürlichen im Menschlich-Natürlichen…"[37] Revelation does not mark a break from human modes of knowing, but an intensification of the very structures which characterize knowledge in its ordinary uses.[38]

It is the unique nature of this parallelism between faith and reason that is supposed to resolve the problem of the continuity between ordinary knowledge of the world and supernatural knowledge of God through revelation. This is especially clear when we compare the formulations we arrived at in the previous chapter—which characterized knowledge of God as knowledge of his unknowability, that is, of God as *mystery*—with the passages in which Przywara discusses the final insight that philosophy can give us:

> Das andere ist das Verhältnis zwischen "*Begriff*" und "*Geheimnis*" auf diesem gesamten Weg. Das Wort, das wir hierfür seit jeher gebrauchen, r e d u c t i o   i n   m y s t e r i u m, bezeichnet in seinem vollen Wort-Sinn am besten, worum es geht…Die "Straße" bricht vor der scheidenden Tür (*μύω*) ab und geht so durch die Tür ein. In diesem Sinn führt der Begriff als Begriff ins Geheimnis: Es ist eine r e -ductio in fieri, Einrücken des begriffhaften Lichtkranzes in die dunkle Mitte, indem es re- d u c t i o ist, Führung auf Wegen und gemäß Plan.[39]

The conditions of thought cannot be construed in terms of philosophical concepts, and this impossibility emerges from conditions *internal to conceptual thought itself*. This mystery-character that conditions all human reasoning provides the parallel between philosophical knowledge and theological faith.[40] Or, to use an even stronger formulation, philosophy itself, on

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[37] *Religionsphilosophie*, 457.

[38] See also Jean-Luc Marion's lucid discussion of this point in Jean-Luc Marion, "The Formal Reason of the Infinite," in *Believing in Order to See: On the Rationality of Revelation and the Irrationality of Some Believers*, trans. Christina M. Gschwandtner (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 30-44.

[39] *Analogia entis*, 88.

[40] In reference to the relationship between philosophy and theology, Przywara writes: "Vergleichen wir diese Problematik mit derjenigen, die sich uns oben von der Problematik apriorisch-aposteriorischer Metaphysik ergab, so ist beim ersten Blick schon offenbar, wie beide in merkwürdiger Weise aufeinander zielen. Denn die Gegensätze eines 'von oben nach unten' und 'von unten nach oben,' wie sie im Problem zwischen apriorischer und aposteriorischer Metaphysik sich gaben, scheinen auch das Verhältnis zwischen Theologie und Philosophie zu begründen. Die Frage zwischen theologischer und philosophischer Metaphysik wird also an der Klärung dieser, zum mindesten scheinbaren, Gleichung hängen," *Analogia entis*, 69.

its own terms, gives rise to the need for a mode of thought different from itself, a mode that we can retroactively say is native to the kind of reflection called for in divine revelation: "In dieser Form binden sich Begriff und Geheimnis auf dem Wege vom Philosophischen ins Theologische."[41]

It is, moreover, because the similarity between supernatural revelation and natural reason consists in both cases the shared *inadequacy* of conceptual reflection, that von Balthasar and Przywara believe the threat of rationalism to be mitigated. The congruity outlined here does not result in pure thought anticipating the content of revelation because the similarity between faith and reason appears in precisely those moments in which reason discovers it cannot determine anything further for itself.[42] This is not to say that specific elements of human experience do not correspond to divine revelation in a way that can be made retroactively evident. On the contrary, the fact that so many ostensibly banal facets of human experience turn out to be unexpected analogues to the truth of revelation is essential to the process of concealing through which revelation makes itself known:

> Dieser Grundaspekt geht hindurch: von der Gestalt Christi zur Gestalt der Kirche zur Gestalt des Christen. Für den Aspekt der Offenbarungsgeschichte ist es kennzeichnend, daß die übernatürliche Einwirkung sich fast in natürlichen Wirkursachen zu verbergen scheint, daß sie, wie Pascal es paradox ausdrückt, den zum Unglauben Eingestellten fast noch mehr verhärtet, während sie den zum demütigen Glauben Eingestellten gewiß befestigt.[43]

This parallelism between the hiddenness of revelation and the breakdowns of conceptual rationality native to human reason thus allows for a kind of apologetic project that can argue for the continuity between revelation and reason, on the one hand, but on the other, does not

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[41] *Analogia entis*, 88.
[42] On this point, see von Balthasar's extensive two-part defense against Karl Barth's accusations of rationalism in Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Analogie und Dialektik," *Divus Thomas* 22 (1944): 171-216 (esp. 175f.); and Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Analogie und Natur," *Divus Thomas* 23 (1945): 3-56.
[43] *Religionsphilosophie*, 457-458.

rationally predetermine—and thus undermine—the possible content of what God could reveal to humanity.[44]

Revelation as the Fulfillment of Philosophy

Revelation claims to provide us with a kind of knowledge that reason cannot derive when left to its own devices. This knowledge does not consist in a distinct set of facts that simply supplement the knowledge that we already have. Revelation claims to provide a final, absolute answer to the essential existential questions of human existence and meaning in the form of a direct communication from creator to creature. This kind of divine communication clearly entails implications for the non-theological forms of rational reflection that touch on these same fundamental questions:

> Ist Christus das Bild aller Bilder, so ist es unmöglich, dass er nicht alle Bilder der Welt durch seine Gegenwart affiziert und um sich ordnet. Ein isoliertes Bild gibt es nicht; jedes erscheint auf einem Hintergrund von Mitbildern, bildet sich in Welt ein und aus, offenbart in seiner innern Gestalt sein Mitgestaltsein und seine schöpferische Macht, Welt um sich zu gestalten.[45]

If we accept that Christian revelation is authentic, then it is impossible to see, for instance, how a theory of ethics could remain indifferent to the resulting religious commitments regarding the meaning and purpose of human life, any more than a metaphysical account of what is could ignore the theological truths about God and the world that have a relevant bearing on the issues at stake in such an account. In a word, the content of divine revelation is not neutral toward the

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[44] Although my interest here lies primarily with the epistemological issues in revelation, equally indispensable to von Balthasar's treatment of the relationship between philosophy and theology are the consequences he draws from the fact that divine revelation in Christianity consists in the event of the Incarnation. This means that humanity itself is the most apt vehicle for God to communicate who he is, a fact which retroactively invests even the putatively non-theological aspects of human existence with a religious significance, even to the point of saying, "je tiefer Gott sich selber enthüllt, desto tiefer hüllt er sich in den Menschen hinein," Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Gott redet als Mensch," in *Verbum Caro. Skizzen zur Theologie I*, (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1960), 73-99, here 91. The entire essay is a lucid overview of the general implications of the fact that God elects to reveal himself through a unique human existence on earth.

[45] *Herrlichkeit I*, 404-405.

commitments and beliefs that we hold independently of religion. All of which gives rise to a

new question: how does natural philosophical knowledge relate to the distinctively theological

knowledge that we only have access to through revelation?

To begin with, revelation does not exhibit a strictly negative, refutational function vis-à-

vis natural knowledge. Revelation and philosophy do not exist as competing theories of the

world for which the acceptance of one entails the rejection of the other. As we have seen, this

understanding of revelation would result in a dilemma that would either turn revelation into a

kind of superior rational reflection or forfeit any meaningful grounds for describing revelation in

terms of knowledge to begin with. Accordingly, rather than claiming that revelation contradicts

philosophical insight, von Balthasar claims that the proper way to conceive of the relationship

between the two is one of fulfillment, which is to say that only in the context of a complete

theological framework is it possible to answer the questions that philosophy poses for itself but

cannot resolve.[46]

In von Balthasar's terms, what we are concerned with here is a "Theologik, in der die

Logik Gottes zur bestimmenden Form geschöpflicher Logik wird."[47] Von Balthasar's claim

here—that revelation should be thought of as the realization of our legitimate knowledge of the

world, not its annulment—rests on the Christian notion that the world as it confronts us in our

normal experience of it is already ordered toward the event of divine revelation. As von

Balthasar puts it:

> Die Analogie zwischen natürlicher Religion und Offenbarungsreligion Christi wird
> (im Gehorsam gegenüber dem Offenbarungswort selbst) nur dann recht ausgelegt,
> wenn wir die natürliche Religion weder leugnen noch als einen in sich
> abgeschlossenen und sich selbst genügenden Befund, sondern in der Absicht des
> Schöpfers der Natur als etwas wesenhaft Inchoatives zu deuten unternehmen.

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[46] I am following formulations from Louis Dupré, "Hans Urs von Balthasar's Theology of Aesthetic Form,"
Theological Studies 49 (1988): 299-318, esp. 305f.
[47] *Theologik II*, 33.

> Damit soll…ausgedrückt sein…daß Gott in der Schöpfungsordnung das wirklich begonnen hat, was in der Erlösungsordnung Jesu Christi sich vollenden sollte.[48]

The knowledge that derives from divine revelation is continuous with the kind of knowledge acquired through philosophy because the world that forms the object of philosophical speculation is implicitly directed toward the divine truth revealed in the Gospel.[49] If this is true, then the picture of the world we acquire through philosophical reflection must take on a new significance in light of the explicitly theological claims that make accessible to us the full intelligibility of our inherently fragmented philosophical take on the world, legitimate as the latter may be. It is in this sense that Przywara and von Balthasar take revelation to fulfill philosophy, rather than negating or replacing it.

To illustrate this point, consider a passage we have seen before in which Przywara analyzes how the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation is both continuous with and renders fully transparent the rational processes involved in philosophically reflecting on the nature of God. Przywara takes the essential problem involved in articulating a philosophical idea of God to consist in relating the immanent presence of God in the world as its creator to his complete transcendence of the world that he creates. This dynamic, which Przywara thinks we need an adequate notion of analogy to resolve, is not suspended after divine revelation, but reiterated, indeed, intensified, in the concrete instance of the Incarnation. The passage in question compares

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[48] Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Die Implikationenen des Wortes," in *Verbum Caro. Skizzen zur Theologie I*, (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1960), 48-72, here 62-63.

[49] This reinforces in a theological register the earlier point that philosophy cannot arrive at a rationally satisfying conclusion to its own deepest questions. It is essential to what philosophy is that it is incomplete, because the answers that it is looking for are accessible only in light of revelation. Gottlieb Söhngen puts this point nicely: "Besagt Kreatur nicht Natur über sich hinaus, das heißt eine Natur, die nicht in sich geschlossen gedacht werden darf, sondern die offen bleibt für eine höhere Offenbarung? Diese greift über die Natur als solche hinaus und läßt sie sogar in ihrem eigenen, natürlichen Bereich einer Vollendug teilhaft werden, die nicht aus den Kräften der reinen Natur, wohl aber aus der freien und schenkenden Güte Gottes herkommt," Gottlieb Söhngen, "Religion und Offenbarung," in *Die Einheit in der Theologie. Gesammelte Abhandlungen, Aufsätze, Vorträge* (Munich: Karl Zink Verlag, 1952), 161-172, here 161. This topic will be explored at greater length at the end of this chapter.

the philosophical "problem of God" with the theological "problem of Christ," both of which center around the interplay of knowing and unknowing, revealing and concealing that has been the topic of this chapter:

> Fragerichtung und Lösungsrichtung des Gottesproblems sind bereits Fragerichtung und Lösungsrichtung des Christusproblems. Denn, was im Gottesproblem die entscheidende Grundstruktur war, die Spannung zwischen Immanenz, Inne-Sein, und Transzendenz, Über-Sein Gottes, ist im Christusproblem im Grunde nur gesteigert. Die Immanenz, das Inne-Sein, ist gesteigert bis zum Identisch-Sein: Der Mensch Christus *ist* Gott. Aber ebenso gesteigert ist die Transzendenz, das Über-Sein. Denn nicht sind in Christus Menschheit und Gottheit identisch, sondern Christus, der sichtbare, geschöpfliche Mensch, ist Gott, der wesenhaft und unvermindert unsichtbar und übergeschöpflich bleibende Gott. Die Transzendenz, das Über-Sein Gottes, ist sozusagen ins innerste Wesen seiner höchsten Immanenz, der Immanenz des Gott-Mensch-Seins, hineingetrieben. Gott ist Geschöpf *als* übergeschöpflicher Gott. Gott ist sichtbarer Mensch *als* unsichtbarer Gott.[50]

In addition to restating the continuity in the structure of knowledge between its natural and supernatural manifestations, this passage indicates a crucial aspect of the manner in which revelation fulfills our rational aspirations. The access to God that Christian revelation purports to give us does not consist in moving beyond the finite human sphere, as if we were suddenly to see and know what was previously invisible and unknowable. Such categories pertain across the spectrum of philosophy and theology, which is what Przywara is getting at in this passage. Just as from a philosophical perspective the transcendence and unknowability of God can only be understood in reference to our immanent world—since the finite capacities of reason can never know God in himself, as such—so too, even when God reveals himself *as himself*, our access to "God-in-himself" is only available through the worldly human *Gestalt* of Christ. The foundational doctrine of Christianity, that God became man—and its ethical complement identifying love of God and love of neighbor[51]—entails that the divine (the absolute, the infinite)

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[50] *Gott*, 282.

[51] On this point, see, for example, Augustine's remark in the eleventh section of Sermon 90A: "Ama Deum totus, *ex toto corde tuo et ex tota anima tua et ex tota mente tua*: sic solum, sic diliges teipsum. Hoc modo solo diligis

can only be encountered squarely within *human* life. Divine truth, that is, does not annul, but ratifies the finitude which characterizes every level of our existence, freeing us from the temptation to attempt to escape or overcome the inherently limited character of human life.[52] In light of revelation, finitude ceases to be a hindrance, becoming instead the sole adequate condition under which we can know God *as* God.[53]

All of this tells us something about the kind of rational satisfaction that Christianity purports to offer to the essentially finite structure of human reason. Revelation does not resolve the aporias that arise in philosophy by extending a boundary we have discovered in our rational capacities, so that reason can now give an account that it was previously unable to give using its own conceptual resources. This notion is incorrect for reasons similar to those at play in the faulty account of the knowledge of God discussed earlier, according to which revelation consists in God somehow becoming "knowable." As we saw, revelation cannot work this way, for this would be the same as to say that God ceases to be God, who is by definition *un*knowable. In the same way, theology does not provide the final bit of missing knowledge that would allow us to

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proximum tamquam teipsum," in François Dolbeau, "Sermons inédits de saint Augustin prêchés en 397 (2ᵉ série)," *Revue Bénédictine* 102 (1992): 63-74, here 72.

[52] Von Balthasar writes that, with regard to the unique character of Christianity, "das echt Unterscheidende…liegt darin, daß das Heilsereignis, durch das der Mensch in die erlösende Beziehung zu Gott gelangt, sich innerhalb der Geschichte abspielt, daß Gott nicht ein Zeichen oder Wort auf den Menschen hin setzt oder spricht, sondern den Menschen in seiner seinshaften Fragwürdigkeit und Zerbrechlickeit und Unvollendbarkeit als die Sprache benützt, in der er das Wort der erlösenden Ganzheit ausdrückt…So viel ist aber vorweg klar, daß, wenn dies geschehen ist, die geschichtliche Existenz, ohne zum Schein entwertet zu werden und ohne daß man ihr den Rücken zu kehren bräuchte, in die Bewegung der Rückkehr zu Gott gesetzt ist," Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Das Ganze im Fragment. Aspekte der Geschichtstheologie*, 2nd. ed. (Freiburg: Johannes Verlag Einsideln, 1990), 83-84.

[53] I take it that this is the same point that is at stake in the oeuvre of Jean-Luc Marion, i.e., to show that the recurrent breakdowns of conceptual rationality are not a threat to reason, but the foremost condition of any act of reasoning whatsoever, and that this claim is only fully vindicated in light of Christian revelation: "If the Revelation of Christ had shown only this, namely that love has its reason—a forceful, original, simple reason that sees and says what common reason misses and does not see—it would already have saved, if not humans, at least their reason…Love not only gives itself in truth in the gesture of Christ, but we must go to the point of turning this proposition upside down: in Christ, love is manifested as the last and first truth, the one that makes all the others possible and recapitulates them all at the end of ends: 'I am the way, the truth' (John 14:6)," Jean-Luc Marion, "Faith and Reason," in *Believing in Order to See: On the Rationality of Revelation and the Irrationality of Some Believers*, trans. Christina M. Gschwandtner (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 3-13, here 10-11.

give a conceptually exhaustive account of the conditions of knowledge where the limitations of

philosophy cause it to stop short.[54] On the account being outlined here, the finitude of thought is

not a hindrance to knowledge that is out there to be had, but an essential quality to what reason

is; revelation does not negate, but *explains* this finitude. Here is how Przywara puts it in a

passage that we have seen part of already:

> Es dürfte deutlich geworden sein, daß es hier um die Auseinandersetzung mit *Hegel* geht. Aber es geht um sie erst in der eigentlichen Schärfe, wenn wir aus dem eben entwickelten vielfältigen Verhältnis zwischen Begriff und Geheimnis die Doppeldeutigkeit seiner inneren Dynamik herausheben. Aus einem doppelten Grund geht diese nicht in einen Begriff auf und ist darum formalst Dynamik. Einmal ist es ein negatives Nicht-Aufgehen: das letzte Versagen und darum Gebrochensein geschöpflicher Begriffe gegenüber Gott. Hier ist es Dynamik im griechisch-antiken Sinn eines Rückfalles des πέρας umgrenzender Begriffe in das ἄπειρον grenzenlosen Verflutens. Dann aber ist es ein positives Nicht-Aufgehen: die Lebendigkeitsfülle der göttlichen Unendlichkeit, die sowenig einen "Begriff Gottes" (als "Selbst-Begriff Gottes") über sich hat, daß sie "als" diese Unendlichkeit der wahre Selbst-Begriff Gottes ist. Hier ist es nicht so, daß ein geformtes πέρας in ein chaotisches ἄπειρον abstürzt. Sondern: ein positives ἄπειρον als Ewiges Leben ist das eigentliche πέρας der Form. Dann aber ist es ein positives Nicht-Aufgehen: die Lebendigkeitsfülle der göttlichen Unendlichkeit, die sowenig einen "Begriff Gottes" (als "Selbst-Begriff Gottes") über sich hat, daß sie "als" diese Unendlichkeit der wahre Selbst-Begriff Gottes ist. Hier ist es nicht so, daß ein geformtes πέρας in ein chaotisches ἄπειρον abstürzt. Sondern: ein positives ἄπειρον als Ewiges Leben ist das eigentliche πέρας der Form.[55]

As with the aporia regarding knowledge of God, the aporias of philosophy always remain

aporetic; the difference here, however, is that these aporias no longer amount only to a negative

insight into the limits of reason.[56] As we have seen, Christian revelation claims that the logic of

the paradox as the only form of rationality adequate to God's self-expression in history.[57] If this

is true, then the aporetic character of philosophical reflection is itself a reflection of the divine:

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[54] In Przywara's terms, the knowledge we have of God in divine revelation *remains* analogical, the analogy of being runs through philosophy *and* theology: "'Analogia entis' sagt also in keiner Weise eine 'natürliche Theologie,' sondern gilt gerade im spezifisch übernatürlichen und genuinst christlichen Bereich," *In und Gegen*, 278.

[55] *Analogia entis*, 89-90.

[56] Cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit III, 1.2*, 963f.

[57] I am drawing here on the terminology developed in Marion, *D'ailleurs, la révélation*, 49–61.

the ultimate inability of "the concept" to account for itself becomes a final vindication of reason.

As Przywara describes this shift in philosophical perspective once theology enters the picture,

"auch der Begriff der 'definierten Wahrheit' führt ins Geheimnis. Aber während der

philosophische Begriff ins Geheimnis ab-bricht, ist im theologischen Begriff das Geheimnis die

Fülle des Begriffs."[58] Revelation fulfills philosophy by giving *reason* to the appearance of the

aporia. It is in this sense that theology completes philosophy: not by answering the questions that

philosophy poses but cannot answer, but by showing *why* it is essential to these questions that

they cannot be answered:

> Es ist also nicht so, daß Philosophie an bestimmten Grenzen rein negativ "vesagte."
> Sondern sie wird positiv "über sich hinaus" ins Theologische "befreit," indem das
> "im" (ausdrücklich) Theologischen sich bewegende *intelligere* die innere
> Vollendung des "zum" (ausdrücklich) Theologischen sich bewegenden *intelligere*
> ist.[59]

Just as revelation discloses God to us by making his unknowability visible to us, theology

illuminates philosophy by making intelligible to us the finitude of human reason, thereby

vindicating the limits of philosophical reflection.[60]

      The theological claim that revelation does not contradict philosophy, but instead makes

possible the comprehensive grasp of the world at which rational reflection aims, allows us to

answer a lingering question from the discussion of *Analogia entis* in the first section: why does

Przywara employ the metaphor of "creation" to characterize the limitations of conceptual

thought that emerge in his investigation? If the conclusion that his argument leaves us with is an

essentially negative insight into the finitude of reason, what entitles him to the further step of

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[58] *Analogia entis*, 89.
[59] *Analogia entis*, 84.
[60] "Aber daß das ewige Wort Fleisch und Menschenwort werden kann—Menschenwort, das immer die sprachlose Stille über sich haben wird als Ursprung und Zurückkehr und durchtragenden Grund—offenbart ein noch höheres Geheimnis des ewigen Wortes. Wort kann auch im Ewigen nur ein Schwebend-Mittleres sein, Erzeugnis und Besitz eines Redenden, der als dieser nicht das geredete Wort ist," *Das Ganze im Fragment*, 257.

conceiving of this finitude in terms that are, to any partial observer, essentially theological and apparently unmotivated by anything present in the investigation itself? Even if we accept that this metaphor provides some kind of explanatory framework for understanding the limitations of our rational powers, we still require some further argumentation for adopting *this* metaphor, as opposed to any number of competing explanations of rational finitude, say, conceiving of reason as involved in a non-theoretical a question of being, or as inscribed in the history of writing.[61]

The answer to this question, I want to say, is that Przywara adopts this image with such little to-do because he is already leaning on the theological conclusion toward which his argument is heading. With an eye to the content of Christian revelation, the obvious concept to appeal to in order to explain the fact of human finitude is the created status of the world, a notion which finds its home in a distinctively Biblical conception of the cosmos.[62] The consequence of this is that the choice to use "creation" as the appropriate metaphor through which to grasp the finitude of human thought is one that can only be fully justified retroactively, in light of the fact that divine revelation reaffirms the concept and provides the necessary details to explain how the image contains the relevant explanatory resources for expressing the conceptual limitations of

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[61] The a pluralism of philosophical approaches to bringing into view what I have been calling the finitude of reason finds lucid expression in the contemporary account of Georg Simmel, "Die Philosophie und die Jugend," in *Aufsätze und Abhandlungen, 1909-1918: Band I*, ed. Rüdiger Kramme and Angela Rammstedt, vol. 12 of *Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Uta Kösser, Hans-Martin Kruckis, and Otthein Rammstedt (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2001), 137-139.

[62] It should be acknowledged that Przywara's investment in the category of creation is parlty a byproduct of the specific emphasis placed on this category in the documents of the First Vatican Council. On the formative role of this context for Przywara's thought, see Aaron Pidel, *Church of the Ever Greater God: The Ecclesiology of Erich Przywara* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2020), 13-17. Nevertheless, rejecting various forms of rationalism by appealing to the fact that the world is created has deep roots in the history of Christianity more generally, as in, for example, the thought of Gregory of Nyssa and Thomas Aquinas. With regard to the former, see the entire first part of Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Présence et pensée: essai sur le philosophie religieuse de Grégoire de Nysse* (Paris: Gabriel Buchesne, 1942), 1-80. On the latter, see Josef Pieper's remarks in his study of the limits of reason in Thomas Aquinas: "Was nun die Philosophie des Thomas von Aquin betrifft, so ist ein Grundgedanke, von dem her nahezu alle Gerüstbegriffe seiner Weltansicht bestimmt sind, der Gedanke der *Schöpfung*, genauer gesagt, der Gedanke, daß es nichts gibt, das nicht creatura wäre—es sei denn der Creator selber. Und: daß die Geschaffenheit die innere Bauforrm der creatura ganz und gar bestimmt," Josef Pieper, *Philosophia Negativa* (Munich: Kösel-Verlag, 1953), 16.

philosophical reflection. This is not to say that the metaphor of creation is *only* available to us in light of revelation, nor that we require the Bible to reflect on its capacity for clarifying the phenomenological data that Przywara is dealing with. It only says that the notion's ultimate justification and meaning remain unavailable without at least an implicit appeal to the content of revelation.[63] The centrality of the category of creation for understanding the finitude of human thought cannot be definitively demonstrated—although perhaps it can be made compellingly plausible, or at least *as* plausible than any alternative explanatory candidate—within an investigation that remains strictly philosophical, regardless of how rigorously it is carried out.[64] This is entailed by very idea of a philosophical account of finitude, taking it as we do to mean some grasp on the elements of experience that elude conceptual demonstration.

These considerations regarding the role of "creation" in Przywara's philosophical account of knowledge give voice to a question that has been in the background since the beginning of the chapter: if revelation fulfills or completes philosophy, just what is philosophy capable of achieving on its own? If philosophy can give a full account of its central category only once it

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[63] Cf. von Balthasar's remarks about the provisional character of any attempt to delineate a philosophical concept of revelation (as in the project of *Herrlichkeit I*) without explicit reference to the specific content of revelation toward which such an account is implicitly aiming: "Alles bisher Gesagte war auf das Kommende hin gesprochen; es vorwegzunehmen war nicht ohne Gefahr. Denn hat das subjektive Erfahrungsvermögen seine Daseinsberechtigung und Rechtfertigung in einem erfahrbaren Objekt, so kann es keinesfalls in Gänze ohne dieses aufgewiesen und verständlich gemacht werden. Darum wurde auch im Bisherigen immer wieder vorwegnehmend auf den Gegenstand verwiesen, aber richtig verständlich wird es doch erst, wenn dieser selbst sichtbar gemacht worden ist," *Herrlichkeit I*, 413.

[64] A good example of this point can be seen in the ambivalent attitude toward the early Heidegger adopted by von Balthasar and Przywara during the 1920s and 1930s. While embracing his criticism of rationalism, both thinkers reject his non-theological interpretation of the phenomenological data at hand. See the instructive conversations in the early essays Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Philosophie und Theologie des Lebens," *Schweizerische Hochschulzeitung* 1 (1938): 46-52 and Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Heideggers Philosophie vom Standpunkt des Katholizismus," *Stimmen der Zeit*, 137 (1940): 1-8, as well as his later remarks in *Herrlichkeit III, 1.2*, 785-787. For Przywara's position, see Erich Przywara, *Gottesgeheimnis der Welt*, in *Religions-philosophische Schriften*, (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1962), 121-242, especially 123-139. On the complicated narrative of the relationship between the projects of Przywara, von Balthasar, and Heidegger, see Niels C. Nielsen, Jr., "Przywara's Philosophy of the 'Analogia Entis,'" *The Review of Metaphysics* 5, no. 4 (1952): 599-620. Karl Rahner voices similar concerns, but shows a greater degree of optimism for the potential Christian adoption of Heideggerian philosophy; see Karl Rahner, "Introduction au concept de philosophie existentiale chez Heidegger," *Recherches de sciences religieuses* 30 (1940): 152–171.

has access to the content of divine revelation, then what kind of knowledge can we arrive at independently of implicit theological assumptions? The topics contained in these questions will be the theme of the third section of this chapter.

Philosophy

Up until now, I have been proceeding as if human knowledge could be divided into two distinct spheres, a philosophical domain consisting of a rational account of the world as it presents itself to us without any explicit reliance on the content of divine revelation, and a theological set of reflections that consider the world in light of what revelation discloses to us. As we have seen, however, this division turned out to be an artificial one, insofar as revelation turned out to be necessary for philosophy to give a complete account of why it takes on its specific structure and produces the conclusions that it does. This means that—if we admit the facticity or even possibility of divine revelation—philosophy exhibits a constitutive explanatory deficit regarding not only knowledge that comes from revelation directly, but also knowledge that is specific to philosophy itself, an observation which, at the very least, calls into question the idea of a fully satisfactory, exhaustive, and defensible philosophical explanation of the world. This logical obstacle to a self-contained philosophical system is supplemented by a second, factual condition that makes it still more difficult to entertain the feasibility of a pure philosophical system. Romano Guardini puts the issue this way in the introduction to his lectures on ethics, describing a strictly philosophical approach as an unwarranted abstraction from the full reality of the ethical phenomenon:

> So weit handelt es sich um das unmittelbare, aus natürlicher Einsicht erwachsende sittliche Verhalten; in unserem Dasein kommen aber auch Offenbarung und Glaube vor und erheben den Anspruch, das Leben zu bestimmen. Nun gibt es wohl eine Ethik, die rein philosophisch verfahren, jedes Glaubenselement ausscheiden und sich nur auf natürliche Gegebenheiten stützen will. Die Absicht scheint theoretisch realisierbar; in Wirklichkeit bedeutet sie eine Einschränkung des Phänomens, denn

die Offenbarung ist eine Tatsache, auch wenn der einzelne Mensch sich negativ zu ihr stellt. Unser Dasein ist ein für allemal jener Zusammenhang von Person und Dingen, Geschehnissen und Ordnungen, in welchem das Faktum der Offenbarung steht, und die Ethik kann nicht tun, als ob es dieses Faktum nicht gäbe. Auch ist das Leben des westlichen Menschen überall durch die Offenbarung beeinflußt, sodaß es jenes rein natürliches Bewußtsein, das jener philosophische Versuch voraussetzt, für ihn überhaupt nicht gibt. Ja es wird sich zeigen, daß schon die Elemente des Ethischen eine Beziehung zum Religiösen im allgemeinen Sinne, ja sogar zum Spezifisch-Offenbarungsmäßigen haben.[65]

The point I take Guardini to be making here is this: even if we admit that philosophy has a certain independence from divine revelation, the philosopher and the world the philosopher is trying to understand are nevertheless involved with revelation at the level of fact.[66] The world about which philosophy seeks to acquire knowledge is one that is inextricably bound to the theological reality of divine revelation, a reality that is, by definition, inaccessible to philosophy. If we accept the veracity of an event of divine revelation, and we further acknowledge that revelation has some bearing on the kinds of questions that philosophy poses,[67] then it follows that a purely philosophical standpoint would represent an illegitimate restriction of the world that it seeks to understand. It is in this sense that attending only to the non-theological dimension of reality would be what Guardini refers to as an "Einschränkung des Phänomens."[68] Saying so does not yet give an indication of *how* partial this approach will be, or the extent to which any absent theological information would be relevant to a strictly philosophical account of the

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[65] Romano Guardini, *Ethik. Vorlesungen an der Universität München*, ed. Hans Mercker (Mainz: Matthias-Grünewald-Verlag; Paderborn: Verlag Ferdinand Schöningh, 1993), 1-2.

[66] "Das letzte Wort ergeht vom *eigentlich Christlichen* aus: da es nur eine einzige konkret existierende Ordnung zwischen Gott und Geschöpf in dieser konkret existierenden Welt gibt: die zwischen Erbsünde in Adam und Erlösung in Christus, dem Gekreuzigten. Das konkret existierende Gesicht von Philosophie (also jeder Philosophie in dieser konkret existierenden Welt und Geschichte) ist erst sichtbar von dieser Ordnung her (in der als objektive allgemeiner Ordnung jeder konkret existierende Mensch steht, ob er es weiß oder nicht)," *Epilog*, 306.

[67] Von Balthasar is convinced there is such overlap between philosophy and theology: "Da die Frage nach dem Sein als solchem die Grundfrage der Metaphysik ist, ist sie für den Theologen nicht zu umgehen, für ihn folgt daraus bloß, daß er ex professo kein Theologe sein kann, ohne zugleich Metaphysiker zu sein," *Theologik II*, 159.

[68] For further examples of topics that emerge in philosophy but can only be resolved within theology, see Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Karl Barth. Darstellung und Deutung seiner Theologie*, 4. ed. (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag Einsiedeln, 1976), 294.

world—acquiring some orientation on just how to think about these issues is the primary task of this section. The only claim at this juncture is that, insofar as philosophical inquiry aims to provide a *complete* account of the questions it poses, it will be unable to do so without appealing to theological truths that pure thought taken on its own does not have access to.[69]

The point of all this is that one and the same world makes up the object of both philosophy and theology, a fact which prohibits any clean, final separation between these two modes of human reflection. Even if we can make a precise and rigorous distinction between the two fields and differentiate a claim that is officially "theological" from one that purports to be strictly "philosophical," it would be a mistake to infer from this that the two kinds of investigation are self-standing nucleic systems that can be carried out with accuracy and completeness on only their own terms, each in complete ignorance of the other. (This is especially true given that philosophy concerns itself with a variety of issues for which theology explicitly claims to provide the final answer: questions about why there is something rather than nothing, the meaning of human life and knowledge, and so forth.) This is not meant to deny a demonstrable distinction between philosophical and theological positions, but rather to say that

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[69] It could obviously be objected here that there simply is no substantive overlap between the questions posed by philosophy and those that appear in theology, either on the grounds that the two domains are concerned with wholly distinct domains, or because one or the other (or both) does not aim at acquiring "knowledge" to begin with, an assumption on which this paragraph is based. (Some reasons in favor of the latter view are given in James Conant, "Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein and Nonsense," in *Pursuits of Reason: Essays in Honor of Stanley Cavell*, ed. Ted Cohen, Paul Guyer and Hilary Putnam, (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 1993), 195-224.) I do not think that it is possible to hold the first form of the objection consistently, at least if it is Christian theology that is in question; see the previous footnote on just some of the philosophical topics that Christianity purports to provide a theological solution to. The other worry, that we have already set up a mistaken picture of philosophy, religion, or both if we take the accumulation of knowledge about the world as the aim common to philosophy and theology, is much more pertinent, especially given the foundational Christian claim that love (and not the judgment that some proposition is true) is the only mode of knowing God. Still, however many things Christian revelation is, at least *one* of its aspects certainly does consist in knowledge about God and the world, knowledge that can be systematically reconstructed and arranged in the form of, say, treatises of theology or conciliar decrees. Whether or not *philosophy* should be conceived of as a practice ordered essentially (or at all) toward the acquisition of knowledge is a far more complicated issue. I do not believe that a position on this issue is necessary for my purposes, however, since the German Idealist tradition with which this study is concerned certainly did consider philosophy to produce (a unique kind of) knowledge of the world. This is the whole reason that an Idealist position *must* (at least implicitly) take a stance on the possibility of (at least the Christian conception of) divine revelation.

this distinction is a retroactive one, an artificial boundary drawn in thought at the service of

understanding a single world which does not exhibit such distinctions in itself. Here is how von

Balthasar puts the issue in a passage that merits citing at length:

> Wie griechisches Denken vor Chalcedon nie auf den Gedanken gekommen wäre, die φύσις als solche nicht auch als ὑπόστασις zu verstehen (ja beide sogar als identisch denken mußte, weil Personalität eben der Kern jenes geistigen teleologischen Plangebildes ausmacht, das in seiner Ganzheit menschliche φύσις heißt), so hätte der reine Philosoph niemals eine solche Begrenzung des Naturbegriffs aufstellen können, wie sie die katholische *Theologie* seit Baius dennoch vorgenommen hat. Wenn sie sie fordern mußte—und das mußte sie allerdings—, so konnte dies nur auf Grund einer völlig neuen, theologischen Einsicht geschehen. Diese Einsicht, die quer durch die Definitionen der Philosophie hindurchschnitt, war die Einsicht aus dem Glauben, daß die Berufung eines Geschöpfs zur Anschauung Gottes, sowie alles, was teleologisch auf dieses Ziel hingeordnet oder allein um seinetwillen verliehen ist und existiert, nie und nimmer im Sinn einer bloß philosophischen, d. h. vom Weltsein als solchem ausgehenden Betrachtungsweise ausgelegt werden darf. Warum eigentlich nicht? Etwa auf Grund einer philosophisch zu begründenden Ausnahme vom allgemeinen Begriff der Natur? Aber worin sollte denn eine solche Begründung liegen? Nein, sondern einzig auf Grund der *nur* theologisch gewinnbaren Einsicht, daß die Berufung zur Anschauung Gottes, d. h. jene Selbsterschließung des Schöpfers, welche eine innere Teilnahme an der göttlichen Natur, am göttlichen Leben, Denken, Lieben und Schaffen verspricht und vermittelt, keinesfalls als aus dem *Wesen* eines *Geschöpfs* ableitbar gedacht werden darf. Wäre dem so, wäre ein Geschöpf denkbar, dem Gott sich in dieser Weise gnädig erzeigen *müßte*, so wäre es wesensmäßig kein bloßes Geschöpf.[70]

Although concepts of "nature" and "person" are ontological (and not theological) in their

original Hellenistic meaning, von Balthasar argues here that the full philosophical significance of

the two concepts could only emerge through the impetus arising from the theological doctrine of

the Incarnation. In the same way, the full scope of the concept of "pure" philosophy is itself a

byproduct of theological reflection. That is, it only makes sense to posit or work within the

division between philosophy and theology if there is *already* some concrete case of divine

revelation at play. Not only because there are no criteria within the philosophical standpoint as to

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[70] *Karl Barth*, 286.

where exactly it would have to draw such a line (how could it do so without having some sense of what lies beyond it?), but also because, without at least an implicit eye to a specific instance of revelation, the philosopher would have no reason to suspect that God might step out from behind the curtain of unknowability and intervene on the historical human plane.[71]

The implication of all of this is that philosophy is—in some sense yet to be determined—dependent on theology. To understand exactly what this dependence entails, however, first requires saying something about what it is *not*. To begin with, von Balthasar and Przywara are at pains to emphasize that the "natural" world—that is, the world conceived of as it presents itself prior to or independently from revelation—is intelligible, in a way that we can recognize and give a limited account of by virtue of our innate rational capacities. In the following passage, von Balthasar offers a theological explanation of why this is the case:

> Die Ordnung der Schöpfung aber kann als ganze aus der Ordnung der Offenbarung nicht deduziert werden, so wenig wie aus der Gnade. Gnade ist Gnade *für* eine Natur und *an* einer Natur. Und insofern setzt sie im logischen (nicht notwendig im zeitlichen) Sinn eine Natur *voraus*.[72]

The point of passages like this one is that revelation poses no threat to a philosophical program on the grounds that *the content of Christian revelation itself* presumes a functioning natural order with some degree of independence. The central theme in the writings of Saint Paul, that the Christian life is governed by grace, a supernatural gift given only by God that renders possible that of which we were incapable in our natural state, presumes a notion of nature that is *distinct from* grace, upon which grace can act. This distinction underlies all of the central doctrines of Christianity and entails the notion of a natural world with a natural order which can only be understood on its own terms: the intelligibility of the world in its natural aspect cannot be

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[71] On the topics discussed here, see *Das Ganze im Fragment*, 100-107.
[72] *Karl Barth*, 291-292.

derived by examining its supernatural aspect. Far from supplanting philosophical explanation,

Christian revelation reinforces its legitimacy as an endeavor distinct from theological

reflection.[73] An account of nature *as* nature can only come through philosophical reflection.[74]

Von Balthasar and Przywara go a step further, and claim that Christian theology not only

recognizes the validity of the philosophical enterprise, but even actively promotes its pursuit.

Although the pure philosophical standpoint can only be achieved by an act of abstraction—by

attending to only a single aspect of a world in which grace and nature are never factually

separate, even if logically distinct—examining the world under its strictly natural aspect plays an

important role in supporting theological reflection. Philosophy, as it turns out, is a crucial

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[73] It is significant that von Balthasar defends the autonomy of philosophy on grounds internal to Christian revelation itself, as opposed to appealing to a logical distinction between the two that would establish their independence. Given our claim that only revelation can have the final word about the conditions on which the world is to be understood, it falls to theology to say whether these conditions admit of a self-standing mode of inquiry that retains its autonomy even in respect to divine revelation. If reason could delimit the intelligibility of the world to the point where it could draw and defend this distinction by itself, then the knowledge we acquire through revelation would only fill a gap in an otherwise independent rational framework, which, as we have seen, is as much as saying that there can be no revelation in the sense that we use that term: "Es dürfte damit klar sein, daß nur von einer 'kreatürlichen' Metaphysik aus unsere Frage stellbar ist, nicht aber von dem Absoluten einer rein apriorischen oder rein aposteriorischen Metaphysik her. Theologie als klar unterschiedlich gegenüber Philosophie ist nur möglich auf Grund eines 'Gott über Geschöpf' als grundlegenden Gott-Geschöpf-Verhältnisses. Ein 'Gott als Geschöpf,' wie es in den Absoluta rein apriorischer oder rein aposteriorischer Metaphysik als grundlegendes Gott-Geschöpf-Verhältnis Form-Grund ist, schließt eine selbständige Theologie aus, weil Philosophie als solche bereits Theologie ist," *Analogia entis*, 69-70. See also Guardini's extensive treatment of this issue in Romano Guardini, "Gedanken über das Verhältnis von Christentum und Kultur," in *Unterscheidung des Christlichen. Gesammelte Studien 1923-1963. Band 1: Aus dem Bereich der Philosophie*, 3rd ed. (Mainz: Matthias-Grünewald Verlag; Paderborn: Verlag Ferdinand Schönigh, 1994), 165-205, esp. 190.

[74] Defending the legitimacy of philosophy as conducted on its own non-theological terms while maintaining that doing so is compatible with a coherent notion of divine revelation forms one of the central themes of von Balthasar's entire oeuvre and is the topic of one of his earliest works, "Von den Aufgaben der katholischen Philosophie in der Zeit," *Annalen der philosophischen Gesellschaft der Innerschweiz* 3, no. 2/3 (1946/1947): 1-38. See also the following passage written in 1947: "Die Wahrheit dieser Welt hat zu ihrem Grunde die Wahrheit Gottes, die sich in ihr offenbart. Aber diese Offenbarung bleibt in der Schöpfungsordnung eine indirekte; das Medium des Erscheinens ist das Geschaffene, das als solches nicht Gott ist. Darum hat dieses Geschaffene eine eigene, wirkliche, geschöpfliche Wahrheit, die mit der göttlichen Wahrheit ebensowenig identisch ist, wie das geschöpfliche Sein mit dem göttlichen Sein. Zwischen beiden Verhältnissen besteht vielmehr Analogie, und zwar, weil die Wahrheit das Maß des Seins ist, eine sich deckende Analogie. Ebenso kontingent wie das Sein des Geschöpfs ist auch seine Wahrheit. Aber so wie das Sein des Geschöpfs nur Bestand hat durch das in ihm und über ihm lebende Sein Gottes, so ist die geschöpfliche Wahrheit das, was sie ist, nämlich Wahrheit, allein durch die sie tragende und ermöglichende Wahrheit Gottes," *Theologik I*, 278.

component of preserving the status of revelation as divine and preventing us from inadvertently reducing it to the terms of human rationality:

> Diese verbietet nun nicht, daß man sich um die Phänomenologie der Natur—und insonderheit der menschlichen Natur—auch innerhalb der Theologie bemühe, vorausgesetzt, daß man sich bewußt bleibt, daß zwischen dem konkret-heilsgeschichtlichen und dem abstrakten Naturbegriff ein nicht zu schließender Spalt bleibt und daß beide Begriffe in einer angemessenen Stufung gesehen werden. Der konkrete ist der wesentliche und beherrschende, der abstrakte ist eine Art Hilfsbegriff, der obwohl inhaltlich nicht anschaulich zu machen, doch zum Schutz des Gnadenbegriffs an seiner Stelle von Nutzen ist.[75]

Theology requires philosophy "zum Schutz des Gnadenbegriffs" because we can only avoid collapsing God into a creaturely being subject to our human rational standards if we have some sense of what these standards are in the first place. More specifically, we must have a grasp of the limits of creaturely being, so as to prevent ourselves from absorbing divine grace into the finite realm of nature. Without a developed philosophical account of finitude, von Balthsar and Przywara believe that we will inevitably be inclined to collapse the distinction between these two aspects of our world, and thereby misconceive Christian revelation. So, even if there were no reason to engage in philosophical reflection on grounds of its intrinsic interest, philosophy would still be theologically motivated as a necessary aid to counteract this tendency.

With this last point about the potential for certain philosophical standpoints to impair our understanding of divine revelation, we have finally arrived at a point where we can see the full relevance of a philosophical account of finitude for the concept of revelation sketched in chapter one. I argued there that the central threat to a coherent notion of revelation is the assumption that revelation must somehow conform or submit to our own criteria of knowledge. Apart from the apparently insurmountable difficulties involved in showing that a candidate case of revelation actually does satisfy such standards (difficulties which include correct interpretation,

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[75] *Karl Barth*, 300-301.

confirmation, historical transmission through witnesses, etc.), the more significant problem with this commitment is the contradictory assumption that God must become knowable to us in the same way that we know the finite world (which would be to say that we do not know God at all, since to know God means to know something that is *not* the finite world).[76] If Przywara's account of the nature of human rationality is correct, however, then he can anticipate and reject this expectation we have of revelation by putting its underlying assumption out of play: that knowledge exclusively and paradigmatically consists in objects conforming to our rational criteria. Philosophy can show that there is an alternative to this account of reason; it can demonstrate that the concept-object structure of knowledge is not exclusive, but a mode of knowing that derives from non-conceptual conditions, making plausible the rationality of the kind of knowledge required for divine revelation. It does so by suggesting that ordinary reason already operates along the lines that Jean-Luc Marion sketches in the following passage:

> A phenomenon shows itself in itself only if it gives itself of its *self*. And giving itself here signifies giving itself in the visible without reserve or retreat, and thus without condition or measure, and thus without cause or reason. Or we could say that the real reason for appearing, like that for givenness, consists in not having a reason. The gift gives itself of itself without borrowing anything from a possibility that comes from elsewhere, such as the parsimonious calculation of sufficient reason—in short, without any other possibility than its own. The gift reduced to givenness requires no rights or special favors in order to give itself or show itself as it gives itself. It requires no possibility from anything, but gives possibility to all, on the basis of that which it opens by itself.[77]

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[76] It is nearly impossible to overestimate the theological importance that von Balthasar attributes to the threat of this type of rationalism within *any* era of Christian history. See, for instance, the following remarks: "Die zweitausend Jahre christlicher Geistesgeschichte sind ein dauerndes und sich steigerndes Ringen um den Menschen und sein Verhältnis zu Gott, genauer um den Vorrang entweder des Selbstverständnisses des Menschen, das er, der Geistbegabte, sich selber schuldet und im philosophischen Akt zu vollziehen disch anstrengt, oder des Selbstverständnisses aus dem Glauben, das ihm, dem dialogischen Wesen, von dem zu ihm sprechenden Gott als seine abschließende Wahrheit geoffenbart wird," *Das Ganze im Fragment*, 100.

[77] Marion, *Negative Certainties*, 111. See also Jean-Luc Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 212–241.

The conception of human reason on view in this passage is one whose paradigm is provided by phenomena that give themselves to be understood in a way that cannot be explained in terms of discursive account giving. Philosophical investigation of this non-conceptual dimension of human experience is indispensable in rejecting the kind of rationalism that issues in contradictions in the notion of revelation, above all by demonstrating its phenomenological inadequacy. For revelation to be possible, it is incumbent upon philosophy to show through arguments like these that a rationalist standpoint is untenable from a *philosophical* (and not merely theological) perspective.[78] If this cannot be achieved and rationalism can be shown to be the only defensible philosophical position, then the possibility of revelation is excluded from the beginning.

It should be clear by now that neither von Balthasar nor Przywara is out to contest the legitimacy of philosophical reflection that does not require invoking theology to validate its arguments, and, moreover, that both thinkers believe that philosophy plays a central role within a theological framework. It remains a question, however, as to what philosophy is actually capable of achieving when this theological supplement is lacking. Minimally, a rigorous philosophical investigation should be able to recognize what I have been referring to in this chapter as the finitude of reason, the impossibility of arriving at an explanation of intelligibility in general, an account of all account-giving. The difficulties begin after this recognition, when it becomes necessary to characterize this insight, to explain or understand or get hold of what it consists in. The issue here is that the finitude of reason does not just denote its inability to give an account of reason, but also its inability to give an account of this inability:

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[78] See Thomas Aquinas's remarks on this point: "Si quid autem in dictis philosophorum invenitur contrarium fidei, hoc non est philosophia, sed magis philosophiae abusus ex defectu rationis. Et ideo possibile est ex principiis philosophiae huiusmodi errorem refellere," Thomas Aquinas, *Super boetium de trinitate*, pars 1 q. 2 a. 3 co. 2.

> Die Gegenwart des sich offenbarenden Gottes ist es, die des Menschen Unzulänglichkeit für ihn selber lichtet; darum ist es ihm verwehrt, sich selber in seiner Vorfindlichkeit, seinem klaffenden Zwiespalt als Maßstab der Selbsteinschätzung zu nehmen. Versucht er es, so gelangt er bis zur Feststellung der Existenz dieses Zwiespalts…So weit gelang wohl der philosophierende Mensch: aber damit ist das anthropologische Problem nicht gelöst. Es ist nur in seiner ganzen Schärfe gestellt. Von ihm selbst her ist der Mensch ein Nicht-ganz-sein-können…[79]

Put simply, philosophy cannot definitively say *why* reason is finite. If it could, then the limitations of reason would fall within reason's own bounds, and reason would be finite in name only.

To clarify this point, consider Heidegger's formulation of the issue in the following passage:

> Allerdings bleibt zu bedenken, daß gerade die in Absicht auf die Begründung der Metaphysik geforderte Herausarbeitung des innersten Wesens der Endlichkeit grundsätzlich selbst immer endlich sein muß und nie absolut werden kann. Daraus folgt aber nur dieses: die je erneute Besinnung auf die Endlichkeit kann nicht gelingen durch ein gegenseitiges Ausspielen und vermittelndes Ausgleichen von Standpunkten, um schließlich doch noch die versteckterweise angesetzte "an sich wahre" absolute Erkenntnis der Endlichkeit zu gewinnen. Es bleibt vielmehr nur die Ausarbeitung der Problematik der Endlichkeit als solcher, die sich ihrem eigensten Wesen nach offenbart, wenn sie durch einen unentwegt von der ursprünglich begriffenen Grundfrage der Metaphysik geleiteten Einsatz zugänglich gemacht wird, *der freilich nie als der einzig mögliche beansprucht werden kann*.[80]

Heidegger's point is that any knowledge we can acquire concerning the nature of our rational finitude will be itself finite in nature. In the terms of this passage, such knowledge can never be "absolute" in the sense of producing a single, complete, and universally valid explanation of the limitations of knowledge. Denying the possibility of such an account is just what is at stake in the claim that reason is finite. Hence Heidegger's conclusion in this passage: although philosophy can and should seek to comprehend the finitude of human existence, any such

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[79] *Das Ganze im Fragment*, 89.
[80] Martin Heidegger, *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik*, 7th ed. (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2010), 236-237, emphasis added.

account will always be *hermeneutic* in nature, an interpretation of a phenomenon that admits of multiple interpretations. Although there are certainly better and worse interpretations, there is no final definitive interpretative standpoint; this inherently provisional quality is the essential feature implied in the notion of "interpretation."

As we have seen, Przywara's *philosophical* account of human finitude culminates in a hermeneutic framework centered on a notion of creation that is borrowed from his ultimately *theological* standpoint. This interpretation of finitude does not rely exclusively on Christianity for its rationale; indeed, the entire endeavor of the book is to show that its explanatory capacity can motivate its plausibility independently of any explicitly Christian theological commitments. Still, there is no "proof" that invoking such religious vocabulary is the most effective way to conceive of human finitude, at least in the sense of a final definitive argument excluding all other explanations. And there *can't* be any such demonstrative proof that this interpretation is the right one. This is just what is meant by the claim that reason cannot give a final index of its conditions of possibility.[81]

This is why, even with all of the qualifications just noted, Przywara and von Balthasar remain deeply skeptical about the prospects of any kind of "pure" philosophical enterprise. It is important to note, however, that the focus of this skepticism is concerned not with the ability to begin philosophical reflection, but rather the possibility of bringing it to completion. Take, for instance, the following passage, in which von Balthasar describes (from a theological viewpoint)

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[81] This leaves open the possibility of a historical defense of the superiority of some particular hermeneutic standpoint. Such an approach would aim to demonstrate that competing interpretations of human reason can be shown to be developments of a single historical trajectory, resulting in a narrative that can then be called into question as a whole in light of the internal logic of its evolution. This, I take it, is the governing strategy in Jean-Luc Marion's defense of what he calls a phenomenology of givenness; see the remarks in *Being Given*, 320-324, as well as the discussion in Jean-Luc Marion, "La fin de la fin de la métaphysique," *Laval théologique et philosophique* 42, no. 1 (1986): 23-33.

the principle reason why it is impossible to determine from within the philosophical process

where its endpoint lies:

> Darum entspricht dem formalen Minimum im Naturbegriff praktisch *kein oberes inhaltliches Maximum* als Grenze, Philosophie bleibt nach oben grundsätzlich *offen*. Sie zeigt damit nur ihr Wesen als kreatürliches Denken, das von sich aus gegenüber möglichem und wirklichem Sprechen Gottes keine Grenzziehungen vornehmen kann. Und dies um so mehr, als das konkrete Objekt der Philosophie eben nie ein rein philosophisches, sondern die Philosophie je schon übersteigendes ist. Philosophie hat somit zwar ein *Formal*objekt: das Wesen der kreatürlichen Welt als solches; sie hat aber kein reinlich isolierbares Materialobjekt, sofern die kreatürliche Welt positiv in der Gnade wie negative in der Sünde Anteil hat am Wort der Offenbarung.[82]

The import of this passage is that it is only within a complete theological context that the

boundaries of philosophical inquiry can be drawn precisely. The reason for this is that the world

is constituted in part by dimensions that cannot be explained philosophically. For instance,

nature, nature, *as nature*, is ordered toward grace, its ultimate fulfillment in divine revelation;

immoral actions are not only a matter of ethical failures, but of sin, and require a *theological*

resolution.[83] Since it is in the nature of the world to be ordered toward revelation, then

philosophical reflection must be incapable of determining where philosophy stops and revelation

begins. If it could, von Balthasar is suggesting, then reason would not really be open to

revelation to begin with, at least not to the extent necessary for revelation to really be revelation.

This inability to "finalize" a philosophical system explains why, even if it is possible to

argue (and argue well) the plausibility of the agenda of "creaturely metaphysics" developed by

Przywara and von Balthasar, it is nevertheless impossible to provide a decisive philosophical

defense of it that cannot be contested by a competing explanation of the finitude of reason—so

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[82] *Karl Barth*, 302.

[83] A point that Pseudo-Macarius makes admirable clarity: "Ὡσαύτως πάλιν ψυχὴν τίς δύναται ἰδεῖν ἢ κρατῆσαι; Ἢ ποία ἐστίν; Οὐ φαίνεται. Αὐτὸς ὁ ἄνθρωπος ἑαυτὸν οὐ γινώσκει, ἕως οὗ ὁ κύριος αὐτῷ ἀποκαλύψει," Pseudo-Macarius, *Homily* XVIII, 1.2 (Collection III), in *Pseudo-Macaire: Oeuvres Spirituelles I, Homélies propres à la Collection III*, ed. and trans. Vincent Desprez, Sources chrétiennes, no. 275 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1980), 218.

long, that is, as the interlocutor does not accept the theological context that provides the final reason to the conceptual aporias that emerge in philosophical reflection. In other words, even though a rigorously pursued philosophical method produces true knowledge of the world, its inherently open-ended character means that it will never be able to determine for itself how much of this picture it has brought into view. Even if an industrious philosopher did happen to arrive at everything it is possible to know philosophically, she still could not demonstrate to herself that she has done so.[84] This is what von Balthasar means when he says that the conclusion of philosophical speculation is the recognition "daß endgültiges Heil- und Ganz-sein-können von der Natur des Menschen aus höchstens formal, nie aber inhaltlich entworfen werden kann, weil die erforderte Synthese der Elemente nicht anschaulich zu vollziehen ist."[85] Although this is not meant in any way to challenge to the legitimacy of the kind of account that philosophy *can* give us—as if to claim that an incomplete account is as good as no account at all—it is certainly enough to render unstable the claim to certitude of any particular philosophical position, and this is sufficient in turn to call into question the underlying aspiration of philosophy, its capacity to provide an account that is satisfying in the way that it promises:

> Wenn [Dasein] sich aber nicht im Ganzen, seinem Gesamt-Grundriß entsprechend runden kann, nützen ihm alle partiellen fragmentarischen Erfüllungen zuletzt nichts: ihr Teil-Sinn wird immerfort vom Un-Sinn des Ganzen her angefochten und zu Recht geleugnet; der Zweifelnde und Verzweifelte, der alle Teilsinne an Liebe oder Wissen oder Tugend oder Leistung dauernd vom Umgreifenden her als sinnlos entlarvt, ist nicht widerleglich.[86]

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[84] In Pseudo-Clement's pellucid formulation: "ὁ γὰρ τὴν ἀλήθειαν ζητῶν παρὰ τῆς ἑαυτοῦ ἀγνοίας λαβεῖν πῶς ἄν δύναιτο; κἂν γὰρ εὕρῃ, οὐκ εἰδὼς αὐτὴν ὡς οὐκ οὖσαν παρέρχεται," Pseudo-Clement, *Homily* II, 6.3, in *Die Pseudoklementinen I. Homilien*, ed. Bernhard Rehm, Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten Jahrhunderte, no. 42 (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1953), 38. Paragraphs 5–12 in this homily are a highly condensed version of the argument I have been trying to make in this chapter.
[85] *Das Ganze im Fragment*, 72.
[86] *Das Ganze im Fragment*, 67.

This instability of philosophical knowledge can only be overcome if there is something like revelation to provide a final interpretive logic to the paradoxes that emerge in the course of philosophical speculation. Lacking such a final interpretative context, questions will always remain about the adequacy of a given explanation for the pertinent phenomenological data. Why should this explanation be final as opposed to another? Has it gone too far in its aspirations? Far enough?.These questions that can be responded to in individual cases, but never silenced.[87] This is the sense in which any kind of "pure" philosophy, even of the most rigorous sort, remains essentially incomplete and provisional, not only with respect to truths that are only given by divine revelation, but also with regard to its own rational domain.[88]

As a coda to bring the issue into clarity, I'd like to leave von Balthasar and Przywara behind and turn to a frequently misunderstood expression of the limitations of philosophy by Thomas Aquinas. In the first question of the *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas makes the paradoxical claim that, in addition to providing knowledge that human reason could not arrive at on its own, revelation is also necessary for the good of human beings because, without it, human beings could never arrive at the knowledge that is already within their power to procure:

> Ad ea etiam quae de Deo ratione humana investigari possunt, necessarium fuit hominem instrui revelatione divina. Quia veritas de Deo, per rationem investigata, a paucis, et per longum tempus, et cum admixtione multorum errorum, homini proveniret, a cuius tamen veritatis cognitione dependet tota hominis salus, quae in

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[87] Similarly, Augustine believes that we will never arrive at the correct interpretation of the Bible unless we already know what to expect it to say by virtue of faith, regardless of the rigor of our hermeneutic approach. See William S. Babcock, "*Caritas* and Signification in *De doctrina christiana* 1-3," in *De doctrina christiana: A Classic of Western Culture*, ed. Duane W. H. Arnold and Pamela Bright (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 145-163.

[88] As the language in the passage just cited indicates, von Balthasar's wants to make an even stronger claim about the fate of philosophy cut off from divine revelation. It is not simply a matter of unsatisfactory theories, of philosophy not being able to get things right in its view of the world; there is an existential dimension to this repeated failure. The idea is that the abstraction of the philosophical standpoint cannot respond to the frustrations of the gap between its inadequate formulations and the world they are meant to capture. In the long run, von Balthasar thinks the inevitable result of this unbearable tension is despair at the very idea of the intelligibility of the world, and thereby the collapse of the philosophy as a whole. Hence his claim that Christians are the guardians of philosophy in the modern western world, since "der Theologe allein [kann] den Gegenstand einer reinen Philosophie sichten," *Karl Barth*, 291. On this topic, see *Herrlichkeit III,1*, vol. 2, 964-983.

> Deo est. Ut igitur salus hominibus et convenientius et certius proveniat, necessarium fuit quod de divinis per divinam revelationem instruantur.[89]

The paradox of this passage lies in the fact that it seems to take away with one hand what it gives with another, apparently both affirming and denying a domain of knowledge that reason is capable of achieving by its own resources. More complexing still are the reasons he invokes in support of the claim that revelation is required to arrive at even the knowledge that reason could, in principle, produce. Supposing that philosophy is a difficult undertaking that requires a great deal of time, effort, and revision, it seems best to regard these qualities as psychological hindrances that do, well, exactly what Thomas says they do: *slow down* the completion of a philosophical program. They hardly seem to warrant the sweeping conclusion that philosophical knowledge *requires* revelation for its satisfactory acquisition. The third reason the passage gives for this claim, that whatever knowledge we can acquire will inevitably be accompanied by "an admixture of many errors," seems, if true, to be a better reason to accept Thomas's claim about the necessity of revelation, but he offers no reason why we should accept this pessimistic assessment of the fate of philosophy. In fact, we would expect the opposite to be the case, seeing as Thomas explicitly states that he is speaking here only about the sort of knowledge which is within reason's power to know. If this is the case, what ground is there for claiming that it is inevitable that we will *always* get something (many things) wrong in philosophy? If reason has the capacity to acquire the kind of knowledge Thomas is talking about, then why—presuming sufficient time, commitment, native intelligence, and so on—can't it recognize and remedy its mistaken opinions about the world?

Interpreters occasionally make sense of this passage by attributing the inevitability of error to Thomas's theological commitments, specifically to the Christian doctrine of the Fall. On

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[89] *S. Th.* I, q. 1 a. 1 co., Thomas Aquinas, *S. Thomae de Aquino Opera omnia*.

this view, the disordered moral condition of human beings occludes our ability to see the true

nature of things, encouraging us to live in a state of more or less partial ignorance, preferring to

interpret the world in such a way that favors our immoral inclinations, disordered passions, and

so forth.[90] The difficulty of this reading is that, if the source of our philosophical errors is

individual willed ignorance to facts that are openly available to us and within our power to

recognize, then it is unclear why such errors should not be rectifiable, at least in principle, which

in turn makes it difficult to see how a disordered moral state can serve as the basis of the claim

that philosophical knowledge will remain permanently error-ridden without the aid of

revelation.[91]

      While the doctrine of a fallen human state certainly makes it much more difficult to be

optimistic with regard to our philosophical endeavors, I do not think it is the principle issue in

this passage. The errors that Thomas refers to, I want to suggest, have to do with the inherent

qualities of a purely philosophical investigation carried out under the circumstance of rational

finitude, and are therefore far more intransigent than incursions of self-interest upon our

intellectual honesty. The claim that revelation is required to complete the philosophical project

has nothing to do with faulty deductions or overhasty inferences, but rather with the fact that

philosophy necessarily issues in paradoxes that thought cannot explain. Philosophy is perfectly

capable of bringing these aporetic moments into view, and in this regard there is nothing

inherently irreparable in the human philosophical endeavor, even in its fallen state. The

difficulty, however, is due to the fact that it is only in light of revelation that we can fully grasp

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[90] See, for example, *S. Th.* I-II, q. 85 a. 3 for Thomas's discussion of the effects of the Fall.

[91] Indeed, some commentators who interpret the passage in this way take the consistent next step and reject
Thomas's conclusion altogether, arguing instead that a mind sufficiently honest and aware of its prejudices is
perfectly capable of arriving at all truths that lie within the power of reason to know. Jacques Maritain, for example,
writes: "ce mal qui affecte l'intelligence…c'est par l'intelligence elle-même qu'il sera guéri…il suffit qu'il prenne
conscience du mal, elle se dressera aussitôt contre lui," Jacques Maritain, *Le docteur angélique* (Paris: Desclée de
Brouwer, 1930), 91-92.

the reason to these aporias; lacking such a standpoint, we will inevitably produce other mistaken accounts of them. Thomas's claim is not that our ability to make *inferences* is somehow intrinsically error ridden, causing us to make at least, say, four incorrect deductions per philosophical system (or however many missteps are necessary to amount to *multi errores*). Rather, his point is that our (correct) philosophical conclusions lend themselves to varying *interpretations*. Error is inevitable in a non-theological enterprise of philosophy because we can demonstrate that we have arrived at the correct interpretation of these conclusions only when we compare them with the facts available to us in revelation. This is why, while explaining his claim that Adam lived in a condition of *natural* human perfection in his paradisiacal state, Thomas claims that complete knowledge of all things knowable by reason is *inadequate* for the natural form of human life in the Garden of Eden, prior to any intervention of revelation. In order to lead a perfect *natural* life, Adam required the infusion of *supernatural* knowledge, that is, knowledge *beyond* what lies within the capacity of reason to know.[92]

Once again, none of this should be taken as an attempt to deny the validity of "omnium scientiam in quibus homo natus est instrui"[93] by making such knowledge derivative of our access to supernatural theological claims. All that is contested is the ability to accrue such truths and round them off into a complete philosophical explanation, since, as we have seen, it is only in light of revelation that we could determine what would count as such an explanation to begin with. The "finitude of reason" advocated by von Balthasar, Przywara, and, I think, Thomas, in no

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[92] "Ad gubernationem autem vitae propriae et aliorum, non solum requiritur cognitio eorum quae naturaliter sciri possunt, sed etiam cognitio eorum quae naturalem cognitionem excedunt; eo quod vita hominis ordinatur ad quendam finem supernaturalem; sicut nobis, ad gubernationem vitae nostrae, necessarium est cognoscere quae fidei sunt. Unde et de his supernaturalibus tantam cognitionem primus homo accepit, quanta erat necessaria ad gubernationem vitae humanae secundum statum illum," *S. Th.* I, q. 94 a. 3 co.
[93] Ibid.

way contests philosophy; it only calls into question how much can be expected in the way of philosophical results.

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The question that has been addressed in the preceding pages—if thought cannot give an account of itself, just how much is it capable of getting into view?—takes on paramount importance during and subsequent to the Age of Goethe in response to the project (and putative failure) of German Idealism, understood as the attempt to appeal to the autonomy of reason as the basis for a form of human life meriting the title of freedom. The shared inspiration for this project was based in the collective commitment, first theorized and put into practice by Kant, that thought can explain its own possibility in terms of the self-authorizing character of reason itself. This formulation is too abstract to be of much help at the moment, but it is clearly opposed to the philosophical program of rational finitude that I have suggested is a necessary requirement for entertaining the possibility of divine revelation. This means that committing to the kind of rationalism characteristic of German Idealism is simultaneously to deny the possibility of revelation, since such a commitment is incompatible with the presuppositions of a coherent notion of divine self-disclosure.

On the other hand, the account of rational limitation outlined in the last section should make it equally clear that rejecting this fundamental rationalist impulse of Idealism does not of itself suffice to motivate appealing to revelation or theological categories. Unless such a critique of rationalism is offered from a standpoint that is already Christian, there is no *a priori* reason that a criticism of Kant or Hegel should put theology back onto the table. This is significant because if, as the next chapter will argue, the philosophical agenda of Idealism requires jettisoning the concept of divine revelation, a philosophical criticism of the Idealist position is

insufficient to merit this concept's reintroduction. Simply put, bringing theology back into the picture cannot be done by replacing the "bad" philosophy that leads us to reject it with the "good" philosophy that theology requires. Criticizing rationalism does not necessarily bring us any closer to theology than the Idealism does, and this is due to the internal requirements of developing a philosophical committed to a version of rational finitude. To demonstrate just how clearly this is the case, my final chapter will turn to Goethe, a thinker whose profound exploration of human finitude leads him far away from Christianity of any recognizable sort and its foundational doctrine of divine revelation.

> *...weil Kant selbst...diesen Weg begünstigte, von einer unbegriffenen Endlichkeit sich wegzuschlagen zu und sich zu beruhigen in einer Unendlichkeit... Zur Endlichkeit gehört—nicht als Mangel und nicht als Verlegenheit, sondern als wirkende Kraft—In-Konsequenz. Endlichkeit macht die Dialektik unmöglich, erweist sie als Schein. Zur Endlichkeit gehört Un-folge, Grund-losigkeit, Grund-verborgenheit.*[1]

Chapter 3: The Fate of Revelation in German Idealism

At the beginning of his lectures on the philosophy of religion, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel reflects on the unique standpoint that modern thought has achieved with regard to religious belief. This achievement of Western thought is marked by the overcoming of the critical program carried out by the Enlightenment against so-called revealed religions. On Hegel's account, Enlightenment thinkers had misunderstood the nature of religious claims in their theological polemics, a mistake that at once blinded them to the function of religious practices in human self-understanding and bound them to a fruitless polemical agenda incapable of comprehending the substance of religion. Here is his assessment of the deistic religion promoted in the 18th century, a doctrine centered on a rational God stripped of all qualities specific to confessional belief:

> Sie [die Vernunfttheologie] faßt das *Unendliche* einerseits *nach ihrer endlichen Weise* als ein *Bestimmtes*, als ein *abstrakt* Unendliches, und findet dann andererseits, daß alle besonderen Eigenschaften diesem Unendlichen *unangemessen* sind. Sie macht dadurch den religiösen Inhalt auf ihre Weise zunichte und den absoluten Gegenstand vollkommen arm. Das Endliche und Bestimmte, das sie in ihren Kreis gezogen hat, weist für diese Erkenntnis zwar auf ein *Jenseits* hin, aber dieses faßt sie selbst auf *endliche* Weise, als ein *abstraktes*, *höchstes Wesen*, dem gar kein Charakter zukommt. Die Aufklärung - diese ist nämlich die soeben geschilderte Vollendung des endlichen Erkennens - meint Gott recht hoch zu stellen, wenn sie ihn das Unendliche nennt, für welches alle Prädikate unangemessen und unberechtigte Anthropomorphismen seien. In

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[1] Heidegger, *Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik*, 306.

> Wirklichkeit aber hat sie Gott, wenn sie ihn als das höchste Wesen faßt, hohl, leer und arm gemacht.[2]

Several points are notable in this passage. Most obviously, Hegel seems to think that such a God is not a God worth having. In its attempt to honor God by conceiving of him in terms of reason alone, the Enlightenment had somehow gone astray, finding itself left with a God who was "hohl, leer und arm." The God of Deism is apparently no God at all. Equally significant is the diagnosis of what is unsatisfactory about this position. Hegel accuses the Enlightenment of reducing God to what he calls an abstract infinite ("ein *abstrakt* Unendliches"). He explains this by saying that the meager God of Deism is the result of an attempt to think beyond ("*Jenseits*") the finitude that seems to be entailed by the historical claims of confessional religion. This attempt backfires because the kind of abstraction implied by such a project ultimately requires conceiving of the infinite in terms proper to finitude ("auf *endliche* Weise"). In Hegel's view, this issued in the fundamental error of Enlightenment religious thought: thinking of God in finite categories, as one more object in the world subject to the standards specific to worldly objects.[3]

The Hegelian alternative conception of a concrete infinite will prove to be the inversion of the concept of the infinite unknowable God that has concerned us in the preceding chapters, as we shall see. Hegel is well aware of this and is everywhere at pains to point out the untenability of taking some instance of divine revelation for the starting point for a philosophical system. My claim in this chapter, however, will be that this rejection of revelation does not stem from

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[2] Unless otherwise specified, all Hegel references are taken from G.W.F. Hegel, *Werke in 20 Bänden*, ed. Eva Moldenhauer und Karl Markus Michel (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1969-1971), hereafter cited as H. The passage reproduced here is from volume 16, page 37. Citations will be given by volume and page number, e.g. XVI: 37.

[3] Hegel's analysis of the Enlightenment is, of course, far more comprehensive than the accusation of one-sidedness in rejecting confessional religion. Nor is it a matter of assessing the theoretical validity of the philosophical positions characteristic of the Enlightenment. Hegel's real interest here, as elsewhere, is in the capacity of this theoretical worldview to form and sustain a collective form of life. For a detailed analysis, see Robert B. Pippin, "Hegel on Historical Meaning: For Example, the Enlightenment," *Bulletin of the Hegel Society of Great Britain*, no 35 (1997): 1-17.

ignorance of the Christian position or a strawman caricature of theology. Hegel stands, rather, at the culmination of an attentive assessment of theological thought initiated by Immanuel Kant and developed by Johann Gottlieb Fichte. These thinkers mark a foundational shift in European thought with regard to religions that claim to derive their authority from divine establishment. Unlike the Enlightenment opponents of religion, these thinkers' criticisms do not rely on misconstruing the nature of revelation. Intimately aware of the relationship between revelation and finitude, their position emerges out of the most probing and philosophically profound rejection of rational finitude in modern European thought. Kant, followed by Fichte and Hegel, perceived and confronted the central issues behind the notion of revelation, and proceeded to develop a powerful argument against its possibility.

If I am right about Hegel's deep sensitivity to the ideas at stake in the notion of revelation, then his analysis of Enlightenment religious thought deserves to be taken seriously. In order to bring into greater relief the full force of the implications of German Idealism with respect to revelation, I will take my cue from Hegel and begin by glancing at the religious thought characteristic of the Enlightenment. To do so economically, I will focus on the most radical and controversial religious critic in the German Enlightenment, Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694-1768).

Reimarus and the Inferential Model of Revelation

Although he was renowned as a brilliant philologist during his lifetime, the work for which Reimarus would be immortalized, his *Apologie; oder, Schutzschrift für die vernünftigen Verehrer Gottes*, did not appear publicly until a decade after his death in 1768. Not until 1814 was he recognized as the author of the treatise, which itself was only available in fragmentary

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form until its recent publication as a critical edition in 1972.[4] Despite continuous work on the

manuscript for the better portion of his life (philological evidence indicates that initial drafts

could have been produced as early as the 1720s), Reimarus made no attempt at publishing it.[5]

The book remained completely unknown until an early version of it made its way into the hands

of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. After acquiring the position of librarian at the ducal library in

Wolfenbüttel—a position that included relative independence from the state censor—Lessing

published several anonymous selections from the *Apologie* between 1774 and 1778. January of

1777 saw the second publication of material taken from the work, consisting of five extracts

drawn from different sections of the book. The five "fragments," as Lessing called them,

developed a programmatic critique of "revealed" Christianity in favor of a Deistic religion of

pure reason. The fifth and final extract quickly emerged as the central topic in the public

reception of the fragments. There, Reimarus postulated that irresolvable contradictions in the

resurrection narratives of the four gospels provide grounds to reject the founding doctrine of

Christianity as a fabrication. The sheer scandal of this claim—coupled with a heated public

debate concerning Lessing's own intentions and whether legal measures were called for on the

part of authorities[6]—largely directed attention away from the second fragment, which departs

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[4] Hermann Samuel Reimarus, *Apologie; oder, Schutzschrift für die vernünftigen Verehrer Gottes*, ed. Gerhard Alexander (Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 1972), 2 vols. On the numerous complex philological issues involved in understanding Reimarus's intention in the text, see (in addition to the introduction of the 1972 critical edition) the thorough overviews of Hans-Werner Müsing, "Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694-1768) und seine Religionskritik an Hand eines unveröffentlichten Manuskripts," *Zeitschrift des Vereins für hamburgische Geschichte* 62 (1976): 49-80; and Gerhard Alexander, "Neue Erkenntnisse zur 'Apologie' von Hermann Samuel Reimarus," *Zeitschrift des Vereins für hamburgische Geschichte* 65 (1979): 145-159.

[5] For extensive background on the political necessity of Reimarus's silence regarding his religious convictions, see Walter Grossmann, "Edelmann und das 'öffentliche Schweigen' des Reimarus und Lessing. Toleranz und Politik des Geistes," *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 85 (1974): 358-368.

[6] Lessing's aim in publishing the fragments remains as controversial today as it was at their original appearance and continues to be one of the most contested points of Lessing scholarship. The most convincing recent account is given in Ernst-Peter Wieckenberg, "Wahrheit und Rhetorik. Lessings Theologiekritik im Fragmentenstreit," in *Lessings Religionsphilosophie im Kontext. Hamburger Fragmente und Wolfenbütteler Axiomata*, ed. Chrisoph Bultmann and Friedrich Vollhardt (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 2011), 261-279. Wieckenberg's evaluation of Lessing's intentions has been developed in Hannes Kerber's recent work on Lessing; see, for example, Hannes

from the criticisms addressed specifically to orthodox Christianity and considers the possible rationality of *any* event of revelation whatsoever. In this extract—the lengthiest of all five—Reimarus argues in painstaking detail that any conceivable form of divine self-disclosure in history would be incapable of conveying its message in a way that could be reasonably adopted by individuals who were not present at the original event itself. He concludes from this that, since every religious tradition relies on the testimony of original witnesses, the idea of a religion founded on divine revelation should be rejected in favor of a non-historical Deistic religion of reason.

The thrust of his argument can be reconstructed as follows. Reimarus's question is whether it could be rational to believe that God personally communicated special knowledge to human beings at some point in history. Now, since this is an issue of a historical event occurring at a particular time and place, it could only ever be perceived by a handful of observers who happened to be present and who would then be responsible for reporting what they had seen to others. Thus, the vast majority of human beings could only possess second-hand knowledge of revelation mediated by the testimony of these original eye-witnesses: "so bekommen die andern Menschen diese Nachricht von Menschen. Es ist also nicht mehr eine göttliche Offenbarung, sondern ein menschlich Zeugniß von einer göttlichen Offenbarung."[7] This reliance on testimony is where all of the problems begin. Prior to any reflection on the original event itself, we must first establish the reliability and honesty of the vast chain of intermediaries through which we

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Kerber, "Zum Wechselverhältnis von Orthodoxie und Aufklärung. G. E. Lessings allegorische Zeitdiagnostik in *Herkules und Omphale*," *Journal for the History of Modern Theology* 25, nos. 1-2 (2018): 1-26.
[7] Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Werke und Briefe in 12 Bänden*, ed. Wilfried Barner (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1985-2003), vol. 8, 192.

have access to it.[8] Attempting to do so would be patently absurd, and exponentially more so as the number of parties involved in the process increases:

> …so verlieret [die Offenbarung] immer mehr von ihrer Glaubwürdigkeit, da sie von Hand zu Hand, von Mund zu Mund gehet, und da nun nicht eines oder weniger Menschen Einsicht und Ehrlichkeit, sondern auch so vieler tausenden zu verschiedenen Zeiten Leichtgläubigkeit und Eigennutz müßte untersuchet werden; welches zu tun fast unmöglich ist.[9]

Even though the unreliability of human testimony does not imply that the event to which they are testifying is untrue, it does entail "daß ein solch Zeugniß unmöglich von allen könne angenommen werden, sondern vielem Zweifel und Widerspruche unterworfen ist."[10] Because the historical accuracy of a putative case of revelation cannot be demonstrated with certainty, no revelation will ever become a universally accepted truth. Since the idea of a non-universal divine revelation is a contradiction in terms, and since we can never furnish sufficient evidence to demonstrate the truth of revelation to the point of satisfying all potential objections to it, Reimarus concludes that it would never be rational to infer a divine origin behind a historical event.[11]

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[8] By drawing such a clean distinction between an investigation of the historical sources through which we have an account of revelation on the one hand and, on the other hand, the interpretation of the account that we possess, Reimarus takes a decisive step toward the establishing the separation of philology from hermeneutics that will prove to be decisive for 19th-century Protestant theology following Schleiermacher. See the discussion in Helmut Müller-Sievers, "Reading Evidence: Textual Criticism as Science in the Nineteenth Century," *The Germanic Review* 76, no. 2 (2001): 162-171.

[9] Lessing, *Werke*, vol. 8, 192.

[10] Lessing, *Werke*, vol. 8, 192.

[11] In *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748), Hume (with admirable brevity) makes a nearly identical argument concerning how irrational it would be to admit a divine transgression of the laws of nature on the basis of human testimony alone: "When any one tells me, that he saw a dead man restored to life, I immediately consider with myself, whether it be more probable, that this person should either deceive or be deceived, or that the fact, which he relates, should really have happened. I weigh the one miracle against the other; and according to the superiority, which I discover, I pronounce my decision, and always reject the greater miracle. If the falsehood of his testimony would be more miraculous, than the event which he relates; then, and not till then, can he pretend to command my belief of opinion," David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 173-174.

I want to step back for a moment to look at the structure of this argument from the second of the 1777 fragments, a structure that underlies each of his individual criticisms of Christianity. The question that the fragments take to be essential with regard to revelation is: what grounds are there for asserting that some event in the past was a direct act of divine intervention? Can we procure the necessary evidence to warrant the assertion that such an event can only be explained by reference to a divine origin? In this way of posing the problem, the truth of revelation becomes an issue of justifying the rationality of a logical inference concerning a historical matter of fact (*Tatsache*).[12] In the fragment we have been discussing, the occurrence of inexplicable events, so extraordinary that we can only think of them as miracles, is proposed as the criterion whose satisfaction would merit the conclusion that the religious doctrine which they accompany is divine in nature. Reimarus claims that the actual occurrence of such events can never be satisfactorily demonstrated and therefore this evidentiary standard cannot be satisfied; his opponents argue that such a demonstration can be given and that accepting the truth of Christianity is therefore rationally warranted.[13]

I have argued in chapter one that an account of revelation according to which "faith" in divine revelation consists in a rational inference cannot consistently account for what revelation purports to do: to make God known to us *as* God, which means to know God *in his*

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[12] On the emergence of *Tatsache* as the dominant concept in German theology for understanding revelation, see Reinhart Staats, "Der theologigeschichtliche Hintergrund des Begriffes 'Tatsache'," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 70, no. 3 (1973): 316-345, as well as the more general background in Jonathan Israel, "The Philosophical Context of Hermann Samuel Reimarus' Radical Biblical Criticism," in *Between Philology and Radical Enlightenment: Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694-1768)*, ed. Martin Mulsow (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011), 183-200.

[13] During this period, posing the question in these terms came most frequently as a consequence of the assumption that the content of revelation is an epistemologically deficient source of knowledge and requires the accompaniment of a miraculous event to prove the divinity of its origin, or at least the origin of those elements in revelation that cannot be independently justified by reason. Such a premise (along with the implications that follow from it) was already adopted by Spinoza, who could write in 1670: "So the prophets were not assured of God's revelation through the revelation itself, but through a sign…In this respect, then, prophecy is inferior to natural knowledge, which needs no sign, but of its own nature carries certainty," Baruch Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, trans. Samuel Shirley, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1998), 22.

unknowability. This entails that the evidence to which we appeal for its truth must be of a wholly

different sort than the evidence that operates in inferential reasoning. If this is true, then

Reimarus's criticisms of Christianity cannot be as devastating as he claims—nor can the

apologetic counterarguments of his orthodox opponents provide any meaningful support of its

truth. According to the form it took in that debate, revelation consists essentially in providing us

with concepts that teach us something we did not previously know about God. On this view, God

is not unknowable; he is just unknown, and revelation is the process that makes him known to us.

Revelation is a matter of dispelling ignorance, of knowing more of what can, in principle, be

known. Putting the issue in this way, however, leaves uninterrogated the possibility that

unknowability itself might be a substantive epistemological category with its own logic, a logic

that is especially pertinent any time God is involved.[14] Posed in such terms, the debate could

concern itself only with peripheral issues, without ever arriving at the substance of Christianity's

claim to truth: can the Christian account of revelation explain how the invisible God could

become visible *as the invisible God*?[15]

    This is not to say that this period did not see long-term developments in the concept of

revelation, however. Indeed, the fact that both the detractors and (especially) the defenders of

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[14] I have been trying to make clear with formulations like these that it would be wrong to say that revelation is somehow anti-rational or alien to reason altogether. The point, again, is to say that the kind of reason at play in discursive, conceptual thought does not *exhaust* the scope of human rationality, and that there are elements of finite human experience—including, in the quintessential instance, revelation—whose intelligibility lies precisely in their eluding discursive articulation. This is why Jacobi's critique of rationalism, interesting as it may be, is of little help in articulating the salient dimensions of divine revelation, or, for that matter, responding to its Kantian, Fichtean, or Hegelian critics. As Kierkegaard rightfully saw, the anti-rationalism of a Jacobi and the rationalism of a Mendelssohn or Reimarus are two horns of the same category mistake regarding the kind of phenomenon revelation is. See Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), 91-96. In this reading of Kierkegaard I am following the lead of Henry Allison and James Conant; see Henry E. Allison, "Christianity and Nonsense," *The Review of Metaphysics* 20, no. 3 (1967): 432-460; and James Conant, "Must We Show What We Cannot Say," in *The Senses of Stanley Cavell*, ed. Richard Fleming and Michael Payne (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press; London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1989), 242-283.
[15] I am influenced in this paragraph by Stanley Cavell's discussion in Cavell, *We Mean What We Say?*, 163-179.

Christianity were almost exclusively committed to the inferential model resulted in an intellectual climate that was singularly incapable of recognizing the implications of the fundamental characteristic of revelation: whatever God reveals concerns truths that are above all human understanding, not in the sense that we just didn't already know the facts in question, but as a constitutive feature of the kind of truth that they are. Those who defended Christianity by appealing to the rational necessity of its doctrines implicitly put into question this central tenet of revelation by explicitly appointing human reason to stand judge over divinely revealed truths.[16] In this sense, the extended era in which nearly every party to the debate presumed an inferential account of revelation proved decisive for the direction of its subsequent assessment in German Idealism.

That this notion of revelation might be mistaken remained largely unconsidered in the period between the appearance of Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* in 1670 and Moses Mendelssohn's 1783 work *Jerusalem*. (Two notable exceptions to this are Gotthold Ephraim Lessing and Johann Georg Hamann.[17]) This is roughly in line with Hegel's conclusion that we saw at the beginning of this chapter, and I want to follow Hegel one step further in his

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[16] The details of this European-wide development are meticulously reconstructed in Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1974); see especially 130-136. On Reimarus's position in this context, see Henning Graf Reventlow, "Das Arsenal der Bibelkritik bei Reimarus: Die Auslegung der Bibel, insbesondere des Alten Testaments, bei den englischen Deisten," in *Hermann Samuel Reimarus: (1694-1768): Ein bekannter Unbekannter der Aufklärung in Hamburg* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1973), 44-65; and Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggeman, "Die destruktive Potenz philosophischer Apologetik oder der Verlust des biblischen Kredits bei Hermann Samuel Reimarus," in *Historische Kritik und biblischer Kanon in der deutschen Aufklärung*, ed. Henning Graf Reventlow, Walter Sparn and John Woodbridge (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1988), 193-204.

[17] Von Balthasar himself produced the earliest study suggesting that Hamann stands outside of this tradition of theological thought; see Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit. Eine theologische Ästhetik. Band II: Fächer der Stile. Teil 2: Laikale Stile* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1962), 603-643. John Betz has recently developed a comprehensive reading of Hamann's religious thought following von Balthasar's results in John R. Betz, *After Enlightenment: The Post-Secular Vision of J. G. Hamann* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009). I have argued elsewhere that Lessing's approach to revelation is hardly philosophical in the sense discussed here, consisting instead of a therapeutic approach to religious problems; see Joseph Haydt, "Irony and Truth: The Method of Lessing's Late Theological Writing," *Lessing Yearbook* 49 (2022).

identification of the moment that European thought moved beyond the fruitless threshold reached

by the Enlightenment. The new development was set into motion by Immanuel Kant and was

continued by those who claimed to inherit his project, above all by Fichte and Hegel himself.

These were the first modern non-Christian thinkers to identify and thematize the substantive

issue at the heart of divine revelation—not in a positive sense, by embracing and articulating a

non-discursive dimension of knowledge and its relationship to revelation, but by a principled and

sustained rejection of the very possibility of something "unknowable." In a word, what is at stake

is a rejection of the kind of rational finitude that I have argued to be a presupposition of the

possibility of divine revelation. This requires some unpacking.

Kant's Original Insight

The host of theoretical issues that occupied German philosophical thought in the fifty

years between the publication of the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* in 1781 and the death of Hegel

are far too numerous and complex to give a comprehensive overview of here, but we can gain

some orientation by way of John McDowell's characterization of the central aspiration of the

collective philosophical project of this period:

> The insight that is fundamental to critical philosophy is that conditions for the
> possibility of our knowing things are not derived from independent conditions on
> things themselves. If we are to accommodate that insight while conceiving the
> conditions in such a way that they are genuinely recognizable as conditions of our
> knowing things, we need to bring the conditions entirely inside the sphere of free
> intellectual activity.[18]

McDowell's formulation turns on a contrast between two conceptions of intelligibility. On the

first account, the knowability of the world is explained by appealing to "independent conditions

on things themselves," while the second accounts for our knowledge of things such that the

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[18] John McDowell, "Hegel's Idealism as Radicalization of Kant," in *Having the World in View: Essays on Kant, Hegel, and Sellars* (Harvard University Press, 2009, 69-89, here 80.

conditions of this knowledge are "inside the sphere of free intellectual activity." Kant's

achievement involves embracing the latter and demonstrating the deficiencies of the former.

These formulations are too vague to shed any immediate light on my suggestion that this thought

amounts to an inversion of the kind of rational finitude that was the focus of the last chapter, but

the language of "free intellectual activity" brings us a step closer to what Kant has in mind. The

suggestion is that the aspiration of critical philosophy is to show that the conditions of thought

are also the conditions of things. These are not two distinct realms, as if *what* we think about had

its own conditions of intelligibility that then must be mapped onto our specific form of *thought*.

This is to claim that what can be known by us is identical with the knowable *tout court*; it is to

deny that there is anything knowable that would not also be knowable for *us*, that would surpass

the capacities of *our* knowledge. All of these formulations call for a great deal of additional

explanation, but they already begin to suggest just how far away such a position is from the kind

of rational finitude outlined in the last chapter. With this in the background, let us now turn to

Kant's own formulations in the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*.[19]

Two related aspects of the First Critique form the basis of its engagement with the

categories at the heart of the notion of divine revelation. The first has to do with the notion of

reason underlying the critical project, and the second relates to Kant's account of objects of

knowledge. The former is essentially a matter of what Kant describes as the self-legislating

character of reason. This already comes to the fore in the preface to the 1781 edition, which

begins with a description of the history of metaphysics in a sequence of intricate military and

political metaphors. The images suggest that the decisive historical failure of philosophy to

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[19] Unless noted otherwise, all Kant references are from Immanuel Kant, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Die Königlich-Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1922). Citations will be given by volume and page number in this edition, except for references from the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, which will be cited by edition (A or B) and page number.

resolve its metaphysical disputes has thrown into question the legitimacy of the disputes themselves.[20] In lieu of the alternatively absolutist and anarchical philosophical resolutions to questions whose terms have gone uninterrogated, the time has come to institute a tribunal which will put an end to the endless battles of metaphysics through a rigorous survey of the legitimate domain of reason.[21] The developments seen by the modern age thereby amount to

> eine Auffoderung an die Vernunft, das beschwerlichste aller ihrer Geschäfte, nämlich das der Selbsterkenntnis aufs neue zu übernehmen und einen Gerichtshof einzusetzen, der sie bei ihren gerechten Ansprüchen sichere, dagegen aber alle grundlosen Anmaßungen, nicht durch Machtsprüche, sondern nach ihren ewigen und unwandelbaren Gesetzen, abfertigen könne, und dieser ist kein anderer als *die Kritik der reinen Vernunft* selbst.[22]

The book's task, that is, is not to respond to a particular philosophical problem, but to determine which philosophical issues reason is warranted in investigating. Immediately prior to this passage, Kant makes clear in a footnote just how comprehensive he takes the scope of this project of critique to be:

> Unser Zeitalter ist das eigentliche Zeitalter der *Kritik*, der sich alles unterwerfen muß. *Religion*, durch ihre *Heiligkeit*, und *Gesetzgebung* durch ihre *Majestät*, wollen sich gemeiniglich derselben entziehen. Aber alsdann erregen sie gerechten Verdacht wider sich und können auf unverstellte Achtung nicht Anspruch machen, die die Vernunft nur demjenigen bewilligt, was ihre freie und öffentliche Prüfung hat aushalten können.[23]

There is no boundary to the critical project; critique is not a specific discipline of knowledge defined by a distinct method and subject matter. It is prior to such distinctions, determining

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[20] On the philosophical-historical narrative that serves as the precondition for bringing into view the problem that the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* seeks to resolve, see the insightful discussion in Gustav Siewerth, "Wesen und Geschichte der menschlichen Vernunft nach Immanuel Kant," in *Grundfragen der Philosophie im Horizont der Seinsdifferenz. Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Philosophie* (Düsseldorf: Verlag L. Schwann, 1963), 75-91.

[21] The legal metaphor that appears on the opening pages of the First Critique plays a fundamental role in Kant's writing throughout his critical period; see the discussion in Willi Goetschel, *Constituting Critique: Kant's Writing as Critical Praxis*, trans. Eric Schwab (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1994), 119-132.

[22] AXI-XII.

[23] AXIn.

which epistemological divisions can be made to begin with.[24] Thus, the project of critical philosophy does not make up one theoretical endeavor among others, but serves as the final guarantor of all rational claims as "dieser oberste Gerichtshof aller Rechte und Ansprüche unserer Spekulation."[25]

This is not to say, of course, that Kant simply helps himself to the claim that such an investigation is possible without reflecting on the numerous plausible explanations for why it might not be. Indeed, it is no small element of the project of the First Critique to demonstrate the legitimacy of such a tribunal of reason, a legitimacy that is only vindicated in the course of the undertaking itself. The primary threat to the project lies in the prospect that the possibility of thought derives from conditions that cannot be grasped through discursive philosophical reflection. In other words, the worry is that our experience is in part constituted by phenomena that elude conceptual articulation because antecedent to and presupposed by any such act of rational description.[26] Demonstrating that this is not the case is a central task of the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*.

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[24] Cf. Kant's remarks near the end of the book: "Man kann die Kritik der reinen Vernunft als den wahren Gerichtshof für alle Streitigkeiten derselben ansehen; denn sie ist in die letzteren, als welche auf Objekte unmittelbar gehen, nicht mit verwickelt, sondern ist dazu gesetzt, die Rechtsame der Vernunft überhaupt nach den Grundsätzen ihrer ersten Institution zu bestimmen und zu beurteilen," A751/B779.

[25] A669/B697.

[26] In a passage that anticipates Heidegger's assessment of Kant, Hamann argues that this attempt to demonstrate the categorial structure of experience fails because it rests on an artificial distinction between concept and intuition, artificial in the sense that it abstracts from an original unity of these two species of representation. The argument is that beginning with such a logical abstraction prevents us from arriving at the real issue, the distinctive kind of unity exhibited by concept and intuition in experience, a unity that is prior to and assumed by any division of experience into its constitutive elements: "Entspringen aber *Sinnlichkeit* und *Verstand* als zwey Stämme der menschlichen Erkenntnis aus *Einer* gemeinschaftlichen Wurzel, so daß sie durch jene Gegenstände *gegeben* und durch diesen *gedacht* werden; zu welchem Behuf nun eine so gewaltthätige, unbefugte, eigensinnige Scheidung desjenigen, was die Natur zusammengefügt hat! Werden nicht alle beyde Stämme durch eine Dichotomie und Zweispalt ihrer gemeinschaftlichen Wurzel ausgehen und verdorren? Sollte sich nicht zum Ebenbilde unserer Erkenntnis ein einziger Stamm besser schicken, mit zwei Wurzeln, einer *obern* in der Luft und einer *untern* in der Erde?" Johann Georg Hamann, *Metakritik über den Purismum der Vernunft*, in *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Josef Nadler (Vienna: Herder Verlag, 1949-1957), vol. 3, 281-289, here 286. Both Hamann and Heidegger are exploiting the fact that Kant seems to leave open the possibility that concept and intuition could be the products of "einer gemeinschaftlichen, aber uns unbekannten Wurzel," *KrV*, A15/B29.

This brings us to the second dimension of the book with a bearing on divine revelation, its investigation into whether there could be an object of experience that evades the conceptual categories of human reason. Although at issue everywhere, the principal resolution of this problem comes in the Transcendental Analytic. At this juncture, Kant has just argued in the Transcendental Aesthetic that intuitions (*Anschauungen*)—through which such objects of experience are given to us to know—are distinct from the concepts that we apply in judgments, and that this distinction has to do with the fact that intuitions are given to us through the *receptive* faculty of sensibility, whereas concepts are a product of the *spontaneity* of the understanding.[27] The task that remains is to demonstrate that we are warranted in applying the latter to the former, given their different origins. This is such an important issue because Kant thinks that we would not be capable of acquiring knowledge of the world if our sensibility and understanding were simply heterogeneous to one another, as we would have no way of accounting for how the spontaneous productions of the understanding could be anything more than projections on the deliverances of sensibility.[28] Once again borrowing a formulation of McDowell's, the concern is that the conceptual structure of reason is no more than an endless "spinning in the void" and amounts only to a set of psychological constraints on how *we* must think, rules of the understanding with no actual bearing on objects outside of our own thought.[29]

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[27] Here is the full passage drawing this distinction: "Unsere Erkenntnis entspringt aus zwei Grundquellen des Gemüts, deren die erste ist, die Vorstellungen zu empfangen (die Rezeptivität der Eindrücke), die zweite das Vermögen, durch diese Vorstellungen einen Gegenstand zu erkennen (Spontaneität der Begriffe); durch die erstere wird uns ein Gegenstand *gegeben*, durch die zweite wird dieser im Verhältnis auf jene Vorstellung (als bloße Bestimmung des Gemüts) *gedacht*," A50/B74.

[28] The fact that both capacities are necessary for knowledge is a central claim of the First Critique. The passage just cited contains several formulations of this point, including the most famous: "Anschauung und Begriffe machen also die Elemente aller unserer Erkenntnis aus, so daß weder Begriffe, ohne ihnen auf einige Art korrespondierende Anschauung, noch Anschauung ohne Begriffe, ein Erkenntnis abgeben kann…Keine dieser Eigenschaften ist der anderen vorzuziehen. Ohne Sinnlichkeit würde uns kein Gegenstand gegeben, und ohne Verstand keiner gedacht werden. Gedanken ohne Inhalt sind leer, Anschauungen ohne Begriffe sind blind," A51/B75.

[29] McDowell's framing of the problem appears in John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 10-13.

In Kant's language, the task is to give an account of "wie nämlich *subjektive Bedingungen* des Denkens sollten *objektive Gültigkeit* haben, d. i. Bedingungen der Möglichkeit aller Erkenntnis der Gegenstände abgeben."[30] The question, in other words, is how it can be possible to hold to the terms on which Kant has drawn the distinction between intuition and concept while maintaining that the application of our concepts in experience really does provide us with knowledge.[31]

In the second edition of the First Critique, the key moment of the Kantian response to this question appears in the Transcendental Deduction of the Categories (§§13-26). Kant poses the issue in terms of the possibility of an experience that could not be construed by the categories of thought. Here is how he puts the problem in section 13:

> Denn es könnten wohl allenfalls Erscheinungen so beschaffen sein, daß der Verstand sie den Bedingungen seiner Einheit gar nicht gemäß fände, und alles so in Verwirrung läge, daß z. B. in der Reihenfolge der Erscheinungen sich nichts darböte, was eine Regel der Synthesis an die Hand gäbe, und also dem Begriffe der Ursache und Wirkung entspräche, so daß dieser Begriff also ganz leer, nichtig und ohne Bedeutung wäre. Erscheinungen würden nichtsdestoweniger unserer Anschauung Gegenstände darbieten, denn die Anschauung bedarf der Funktionen des Denkens auf keine Weise.[32]

This passage entertains the possibility of a discrepancy between a sensible experience and the concepts that we employ to comprehend that experience. In the example given here, the worry is that, even though we can only *conceive* of the world by construing certain events as a relationship of cause and effect, it still remains to be shown that causal relationships are also constitutive of our sensible *perception* of the world, that causality is not simply a law of thought that we project onto our experience of objects. In other words, the concern is that an object could

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[30] A89-90/B122.
[31] On the formulation of the problem to which the Deduction tries to respond and its relation to the concept-intuition distinction, see Dieter Henrich, "The Proof-Structure of Kant's Transcendental Deduction," *The Review of Metaphysics* 22, no. 4 (1969): 640-659, especially 653-655.
[32] A90/B123.

be given to us in intuition that is inexplicable by—or even contradicts—the laws of the understanding. If this were the case—that concepts fundamental to our understanding like causality were merely subjective rules about how we think—then, Kant argues, we would lose any legitimate claim to knowledge, since any judgment we happen to make would only be a reflection on how we just happen to think.[33] Even if we can successfully demonstrate contra Hume that our conceiving of events in the world in terms of cause and effect is a necessary law of thought and not merely a contingent habit acquired through custom, we will be no closer to explaining the possibility of *knowing* causes unless we can also show that all objects given to us in sensible experience also stand under causal relationships.

In broad terms, the Deduction claims that an intuition intractable to the categories of the understanding cannot be given in experience on account of the fact that the conditions through which an object is given in intuition *already are* the conditions under which an object can be thought. The point of entry for the argument is the observation that it is impossible for even simple sensory experience to be an exclusively passive affair with no participation on the part of the subject. Here is how Kant puts this point in his initial gloss of the claim:

> Das Mannigfaltige der Vorstellungen kann in einer Anschauung gegeben werden, die bloß sinnlich, d. i. nichts als Empfänglichkeit ist… Allein die Verbindung *(conjunctio)* eines Mannigfaltigen überhaupt, kann niemals durch Sinne in uns kommen,…denn sie ist ein Aktus der Spontaneität der Vorstellungskraft, und, da man diese, zum Unterschiede von der Sinnlichkeit, Verstand nennen muß, so ist alle Verbindung,…eine Verstandeshandlung...[34]

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[33] "Denn z. B. der Begriff der Ursache, welcher die Notwendigkeit eines Erfolges unter einer vorausgesetzten Bedingung aussagt, würde falsch sein, wenn er nur auf einer beliebigen uns eingepflanzten subjektiven Notwendigkeit, gewisse empirische Vorstellungen nach einer solchen Regel des Verhältnisses zu verbinden, beruhte. Ich würde nicht sagen können: die Wirkung ist mit der Ursache im Objekte (d. i. notwendig) verbunden, sondern ich bin nur so eingerichtet, daß ich diese Vorstellung nicht anders als so verknüpft denken kann, welches gerade das ist, was der Skeptiker am meisten wünscht, denn alsdann ist alle unsere Einsicht, durch vermeinte objektive Gültigkeit unserer Urteile, nichts als lauter Schein, und es würde auch an Leuten nicht fehlen, die diese subjektive Notwendigkeit (die gefühlt werden muß) von sich nicht gestehen würden; zum wenigsten könnte man mit niemandem über dasjenige hadern, was bloß auf der Art beruht, wie sein Subjekt organisiert ist," B168.
[34] B129-130.

So, to see a set of shapes and colors as a house, for instance, cannot be the result of a strictly

passive act of perception. Combining sensible forms in this way as opposed to any number of

others requires appealing to spontaneous activity on the part of the subject. Such discrimination,

if it is to be anything other than arbitrary, presupposes principles to serve as the basis for its

application in sensible experience.

Kant locates these principles in what he calls the "synthetic unity of apperception," the

originally self-conscious character of the understanding. The strategy of the Deduction is to show

that self-consciousness is not only a feature of judgments but a constitutive quality of sensible

intuitions. If this were not the case, Kant argues, we would face an infinite regress in attempting

to explain how sensible perception could be taken up into a coherent unity of experience that I

recognize as my own.[35] Here is the central passage:

> Das: *Ich denke*, muß alle meine Vorstellungen begleiten können; denn sonst würde
> etwas in mir vorgestellt werden, was garnicht gedacht werden könnte, welches
> ebensoviel heißt, als die Vorstellung würde entweder unmöglich, oder wenigstens
> für mich nichts sein. Diejenige Vorstellung, die vor allem Denken gegeben sein
> kann, heißt *Anschauung*. Also hat alles Mannigfaltige der Anschauung eine
> notwendige Beziehung auf das: *Ich denke*, in demselben Subjekt, darin dieses
> Mannigfaltige angetroffen wird. Diese Vorstellung aber ist ein Aktus
> der *Spontaneität*, d. i. sie kann nicht als zur Sinnlichkeit gehörig angesehen
> werden.[36]

Kant's argument turns on the claim voiced at the end of this passage, that if it is granted that the

spontaneous unity of self-consciousness is just as much a condition of sensible experience as it is

of acts of judgment, then the same laws that prescribe the self-conscious unity of the

understanding also govern the unity of any intuition that is given to us to know.

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[35] Cf. Konrad Cramer, "Über Kants Satz: Das: Ich denke, muß alle meine Vorstellungen begleiten können," in
Theorie der Subjektivität, ed. Konrad Cramer et al. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1987), 167-202.
[36] B131-132.

The conclusion that we are meant to draw from this is that the discrimination that occurs in sensory perception—what enables us to see a house instead of a conglomeration of colors, for example, or to distinguish between a single subsisting object and causal events—is not a subsequent projection of the understanding on meaning-neutral information provided by the senses, but rather plays a formative role in the process through which an intuition gives an object to be known. In other words, even though intuitions are distinct from concepts, they are not separable from concepts as intelligible quantities independent of any conceptual contribution.[37] Insofar as the unity through which intuitions become intelligible to us as objects cannot *only* be the result of passive reception, this unity must derive from the spontaneity of the understanding. This claim—the central one of the Deduction—appears in abbreviated form in a footnote that appears in paragraph 26:

> Diese Einheit hatte ich in der Ästhetik bloß zur Sinnlichkeit gezählt, um nur zu bemerken, *daß sie vor allem Begriffe vorhergehe, ob sie zwar eine Synthesis, die nicht den Sinnen angehört*, durch welche aber alle Begriffe von Raum und Zeit zuerst möglich werden, voraussetzt.[38]

The assertion that appears in this passage is that our sensibility is inconceivable as a self-standing faculty. The synthetic unity of representations in our sensibility—what makes it a capacity that can belong to a subject—cannot be explained in terms of the receptive element that is proper to it but requires assuming some original contribution on the part of the understanding. This is to say that the fact of an object's being given as an intuition—prior to any concept application in an act of judgment—already entails that it is informed by the conceptual structure of thought. In his clearest formulation of the point, Kant writes:

> Dieselbe Funktion, welche den verschiedenen Vorstellungen in einem *Urteile* Einheit gibt, die gibt auch der bloßen Synthesis verschiedener Vorstellungen in

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[37] Here I am following the terms of Robert Pippin; see Robert B. Pippin, "Concept and Intuition. On Distinguishability and Separability," *Hegel-Studien* 40 (2005): 25-39.
[38] B160-161n., emphasis added.

einer *Anschauung* Einheit, welche, allgemein ausgedrückt, der reine Verstandesbegriff heißt.[39]

The sensible unity of an intuition—its intelligibility to us—and the conceptual unity of a judgment form distinct species of a single genus of unity.[40] If this is the case, then Kant has responded to the objection he set out to meet: *there cannot be* an intuition that contradicts the laws of thought or that eludes conceptual construal by being intractable to the categories of the understanding, and consequently all objects of experience are subject to categorial unity.[41]

What all of this means, of course, depends a great deal on how much one understands to fall under the terms "intuition" and "object of experience," and there is endless interpretative controversy about what Kant took himself to have shown at the conclusion of the Transcendental Deduction.[42] Some recent interpreters, most notably McDowell, have gone so far as to claim that the argument is meant to deny that there is any gap at all between what can be thought and what actually is, and that this supposed distinction serves only "to signal the emptiness of such a notion and to warn against the philosophical confusion of thinking that such a notion can be put to work in theoretical philosophy."[43] A host of other commentators have argued that the

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[39] A79/B104-105.
[40] These are the formulations of Thomas Land; see Thomas Land, "Kant's Spontaneity Thesis," *Philosophical Topics* 34 (2006): 189-220, n. 40.
[41] See B144-145.
[42] The interpretative issue hinges on what question we take the Transcendental Deduction to be providing an answer to. Is the question as general as, "What is the relation between *the general form of what is* and *the general form of knowledge*?" James Conant, "Why Kant Is Not a Kantian," *Philosophical Topics* 44, no. 1 (2016): 75-125, here 83 (emphasis in the original); or, is the question (at least implicitly) restricted to the relationship between the form of thought and *our* forms of sensibility, in which case at least a portion of the Deduction "has to look like a restriction and like a strangely psychological fact about our finitude," Robert B. Pippin, "Postscript: On McDowell's Response to 'Leaving Nature Behind'," in *The Persistence of Subjectivity: On the Kantian Aftermath* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 206-220, here 213.
[43] James Conant, "Freedom, Cruelty, and Truth: Rorty versus Orwell," in *Rorty and His Critics*, ed. Robert B. Brandom (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 268-342, here 318, n. 15. Graham Bird was the important early forerunner of this reading; see Graham Bird, *Kant's Theory of Knowledge: An Outline of One Central Argument in the 'Critique of Pure Reason'*," (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962); see especially the lucid exegesis of Kant's employment of the term *noumenon* at 18-35. There is by no means a consensus, however, regarding which commitments such a reading entails; see Graham Bird, "McDowell's Kant: 'Mind and World'," *Philosophy* 71 (1996): 219-243.

commensurability of intuitions and concepts demonstrated in the Deduction explicitly concedes

what McDowell has Kant excluding, the *de facto* possibility of events, things, or phenomena in

the world that cannot be comprehended by the categories of our human understanding; what the

Deduction offers amounts only to a more sophisticated form of the psychologism that he was

ostensibly trying to escape.[44] What is clear is that his contemporaries fell into the latter camp,

and that their criticisms of him were primarily characterized by two claims. First, Kant had failed

to demonstrate that the categories of the understanding truly exhibit objective validity, saddling

us instead with either the inability to know things in themselves[45] or yoking our capacity for

knowledge to the ultimately contingent forms of sensibility that we just happen to possess.[46]

Second, despite this shortcoming, Kant's project marked a decisive step toward achieving the

standpoint we are looking for, an innovation relating above all to Kant's recognition that the

distinguishing features of reason are its spontaneity and its self-legislation. Regardless of

whether—as claimed by McDowell—this issue already emerges in its essential form within the

First Critique[47] or only subsequently achieved its complete articulation in the work of Fichte and

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[44] See, for instance, the remarks in Robert B. Pippin, "McDowell's German's: Response to 'On Pippin's Postscript'," *European Journal of Philosophy* 15 (2007): 411-434, especially 422. This camp is also frought with disagreement, as evident from the fact that its members include P. F. Strawson, who holds that, while Kant was officially committed to an unfortunate view of psychological faculties, these are not essentially to his essential insights concerning the nature of meaning; and Robert Hanna, who agrees that our forms of intuition prevent us from knowing all that could be known, but that this is a sound philosophical point that should be defended. See P. F. Strawson, *The Bounds of Sense: An Essay on Kant's Critique of Pure Reason* (London: Methuen, 1966), 15-23; and Robert Hanna, "Kant, the Copernican Devolution, and Real Metaphysics," in *The Palgrave Kant Handbook*, ed. Matthew C. Altman (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 761-789.

[45] Jacobi proved to be the most vocal critic on this score; see Eckhart Förster, *Die 25 Jahre der Philosophie* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2011), 96–105.

[46] It is this second criticism that gets to the heart of the matter for my purposes, as it thematizes the notion that thought could determine—for itself and without remainder—the intelligibility of *any* sensible, without having to appeal to an accidental quality of *our* sensibility. On this score, see Robert B. Pippin, *Hegel's Idealism*, 35-41.

[47] To be sure, McDowell only thinks that Kant manages to formulate the problem and sketch what would count as a solution, without arriving at it himself. For McDowell, the problem with Kant's attempt is not that there could be other forms of sensibility, thereby restricting the applicability of his results to rational creatures "like us"; the issue is that the spatio-temporal character of our sensibility remains an inexplicable quality of our psychology, a brute fact which therefore lies outside the space of reasons. See "Hegel's Idealism as Radicalization of Kant," 79. The formulations he finds troublesome come from passages like this one: "Von der Eigentümlichkeit unseres Verstandes aber, nur vermittelst der Kategorien und nur gerade durch diese Art und Zahl derselben Einheit der Apperzeption a

Hegel, the epistemological task of German Idealism, a task of exfoliating the implications of the

insight described in the McDowell passage we began with, was put irrevocably into motion in

1781 by the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*: to explain that nothing *exists* which cannot be *thought*,

that the categories of thought just are the categories of being.

Regardless of how matters stand with Kant, demonstrating this claim was clearly Hegel's

project in the *Wissenschaft der Logik*, a task that he outlines in a section called "Vom Begriff im

Allgemeinen," which serves as an introduction to the climactic third part of the book. The

section begins by praising what he deems to be the most important achievement of Kantian

philosophy: the insight in the Deduction that the unity of our understanding is not dictated, as it

were, from elsewhere, outside of thought, but is instead a product of the self-grounding character

of reason. The recognition of the spontaneous character of thought, the fact that it legislates its

own conditions, is the foundational insight of critical philosophy and the crucial presupposition

of Hegel's own speculative Idealism:

> Es gehört zu den tiefsten und richtigsten Einsichten, die sich in der Kritik der
> Vernunft finden, daß die *Einheit*, die das *Wesen des Begriffs* ausmacht, als die
> *ursprünglich-synthetische* Einheit der *Apperzeption*, als Einheit des „*Ich denke*"
> oder des Selbstbewußtseins erkannt wird.[48]

Hegel proceeds to argue, however, that Kant did not develop to the full extent the implications

that follow from this claim. His central criticism centers on Kant's claim that concepts are

meaningless without a supplement provided by intuition. For Hegel's Kant, concepts on their

own can never yield knowledge; thought, taken by itself, lacks content, and that content can only

be provided by the non-conceptual addition of intuition.[49] Hegel's claim is that this commitment

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priori zustande zu bringen, läßt sich ebensowenig ferner ein Grund angeben, als warum wir gerade diese und keine
anderen Funktionen zu urteilen haben, oder warum Zeit und Raum die einzigen Formen unserer möglichen
Anschauung sind," B145-146.
[48] H, VI: 254.
[49] H, VI: 258-259.

renders Kant unable to fully comprehend the scope of what he undertook in the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, an undertaking which itself seems to be a clear instance of what he apparently denied: thought giving itself its own content. Hegel's alternative is to jettison the Kantian thesis regarding the emptiness of thought and recognize that, in Sebastian Rödl's formulation, "the category does not acquire content through its application to sensibility, but through itself, through self-consciousness alone."[50] The task of the *Wissenschaft der Logik* is to investigate the kind of content that thought legislates for itself; not to provide a catalogue of everything that can be known, but to give an account of what constitutes the knowability of objects in the first place.[51] This is the heart of the Hegelian enterprise and consists in taking seriously the fact that thought—and only thought—can determine what it is to be thinkable.[52]

It is important to note that this project of determining what can be thought does not mean determining what can be thought *for us*, as if the whole matter were subjective, concerning only human beings and *our* conditions of knowability. Hegel means for his position to have an objective bearing and to be a claim not about us, but about the world. As he writes in the introduction,

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[50] Sebastian Rödl, "The Science of Logic as the Self-Constituting Power of Knowledge," in *German Idealism Today*, ed. Markus Gabriel and Anders Moe Rasmussen (Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2017), 151-158, here 153.

[51] Thus, it is impossible to set up any antecedent requirements concerning the nature of such an investigation from the outset, as if from some vantage point outside of thought; thinking must determine for itself what will count as such a project: "Die Logik dagegen kann keine dieser Formen der Reflexion oder Regeln und Gesetze des Denkens voraussetzen, denn sie machen einen Teil ihres Inhalts selbst aus und haben erst innerhalb ihrer begründet zu werden. Nicht nur aber die Angabe der wissenschaftlichen Methode, sondern auch der *Begriff* selbst der *Wissenschaft* überhaupt gehört zu ihrem Inhalte, und zwar macht er ihr letztes Resultat aus; was sie ist, kann sie daher nicht voraussagen, sondern ihre ganze Abhandlung bringt dies Wissen von ihr selbst erst als ihr Letztes und als ihre Vollendung hervor," H, V: 35.

[52] This is not to say that there are no rules on how we can think, or that thought can simply choose to ignore any constraint that temporarily restricts what could count as thought, such as the impossibility of the thought of something with contradictory predicates. The point is that such restrictions only count as restrictions because they are taken to be so by thought. See the clear formulations of this point in Robert B. Pippin, *Hegel's Realm of Shadows: Logic as Metaphysics in* The Science of Logic (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2018), 200-201.

> Die reine Wissenschaft setzt somit die Befreiung von dem Gegensatze des Bewußtseins voraus. Sie enthält den *Gedanken, insofern er eben so sehr die Sache an sich selbst ist*, oder *die Sache an sich selbst, insofern sie eben so sehr der reine Gedanke ist*. Als Wissenschaft ist die Wahrheit das reine sich entwickelnde Selbstbewußtsein, und hat die Gestalt des Selbsts, daß *das an und für sich Seiende gewußter Begriff, der Begriff als solcher aber das an und für sich Seiende ist*.[53]

To give an account of the categories of thought is just thereby to give an account of the world in its intelligibility. The Greater Logic is not an explanation of the *mind*, but an interpretation of *being*, according to which *to be is to be intelligible*.[54]

The rub lies in the thesis that thought is inherently discursive, consisting of assertoric judgments that function through the application of concepts. The syllogism fills itself in from there: if thought is essentially conceptual and the structure of being is the same as the structure of thought, then the world is structured in such a way that nothing in the world can elude construal in concepts. Not just because *we* do not possess the capacity to comprehend such a phenomenon; the point is to deny that there could be a phenomenon that we cannot comprehend at all. Here is how Hegel puts this point in a summary passage from the *Vorlesungen über die Religion*:

> Denn eben das Erste—entweder die logische Abstraktion des Seins oder die endliche Welt—, dies Erste, *Unmittelbare*, nicht gesetzt Erscheinende wird in dem Resultat selbst gesetzt als ein *Gesetztes*, nicht Unmittelbares, und degradiert vom Unmittelbaren zum Gesetzten, so daß der absolute Geist vielmehr das Wahre ist, das Setzen der Idee wie der Natur und des endlichen Geistes. Oder der absolute, seiner selbst sich bewußte Geist ist das Erste und einzige Wahre, in welchem die endliche Welt, die so ein Gesetztes ist, als Moment ist.[55]

The insight described here, the one we are supposed to arrive at in the course of the *Logik*, is that even the most promising candidates of pure non-conceptual immediacy—a particular material thing, or being in its universal abstraction from all determinate content—are what they are by

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[53] H, V: 35.

[54] See the apt discussion in Martin Heidegger, *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik*, 15-17. What Heidegger remarks there about Kant applies with equal—perhaps even greater—force to Hegel.

[55] H, XVI: 198-199.

virtue of conceptual determinations. This is what Hegel means when says that we recognize that

this supposed "Unmittelbare" has actually been a "Gesetztes" all along: not that material things

are concepts, but that we understand the contrast between concepts and things only because it is

a distinction that is drawn in thought. Even the most immediate phenomena are not outside of the

concept; the fact that they are intelligible to us *as* immediate is possible only through the

mediation of conceptuality. All of which explains why, when Hegel describes what he holds to

be the regrettable state of modern philosophy, he locates the fundamental problem in a

widespread commitment to the category of incomprehensibility, of an experience that cannot be

comprehended by conceptual thought:

> Neuerlich konnte man sich der Bemühung mit dem Begriffe um so mehr überhoben glauben, da, wie es eine Zeitlang Ton war, der Einbildungskraft, dann dem Gedächtnisse alles mögliche Schlimme nachzusagen, es in der Philosophie seit geraumer Zeit zur Gewohnheit geworden und zum Teil noch gegenwärtig ist, auf den *Begriff* alle üble Nachrede zu häufen, ihn, der das Höchste des Denkens ist, verächtlich zu machen und dagegen für den höchsten sowohl szientifischen als moralischen Gipfel das *Unbegreifliche* und das *Nichtbegreifen* anzusehen.[56]

It should be clear by now that Hegel's objection to such a tendency is rooted in its assumption

that there could be some thing or event that is outside of the *Begriff* and therefore cannot be

understood by us. To show that the contempt for the Concept described in this passage is

misplaced and to deny the possibility of an incomprehensible phenomenon is the task Hegel has

set himself in the *Wissenschaft der Logik*.[57]

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[56] H, VI: 252-253.

[57] Fichte, of course, plays an important intermediary role in establishing a conception of human rationality that is exhausted by an autonomous space of reasons. Put roughly, Fichte's argument is that Kant's insistence on the self-conscious character of any experience already implies that all experience must be subject to the native categories of human thought. See Robert B. Pippin, "Fichte's Alleged Subjective, Psychological, One-Sided Idealism," in *The Reception of Kant's Critical Philosophy: Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel*, ed. Sally Sedgwick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 147-170. Vincent Holzer puts Fichte's contribution this way: "Le 'je pense' étant rattaché aux objets de l'intuition, penser veut dire nécessairement rendre fini, ou 'finitiser' (*verendlichen*). L'équivalence célèbre que Fichte énonce, selon laquelle MOI = MOI, est une sorte de radicalisation de la thèse kantienne selon laquelle le 'je pense' accompagne toutes nos représentations et s'y rapporte nécessairement. Le moi réalise ainsi sa

With all of this on the table, we can finally get a grip on the claim I made at the beginning of the chapter to the effect that Kant and his successors placed at the center of their project issues that are at the heart of divine revelation: not by way of a head-on attack against revelation itself, but through a theory of human rationality that precludes the categories that make up the essence of revelation. The foundational premise of the philosophical tradition beginning with Kant is the rejection of the possibility of a phenomenon that is not explicable in terms of the conceptual structure of our own rationality. If this project is successful, then an Idealist attack on divine revelation—unlike that of Enlightenment thinkers like Reimarus— would leave no room for the theologian to raise his hand and say, "But you have it all wrong! You've mistaken revelation for something it isn't and sidestepped all of the relevant issues." In contrast to most Enlightenment thinkers, Kant, Fichte, and Hegel were well aware that the possibility of a historical revelation on the part of a transcendent God relies entirely on the same notion of incomprehensibility that each was respectively attempting to preclude.

The claim I have been trying to make is that the animating principle of German Idealism—that there are no boundaries to the domain of the *Begriff* outside of which a phenomenon could fall—implies a critique of divine revelation that directly confronts its philosophical presuppositions. For the remainder of the chapter, I will turn to the explicit considerations given by these thinkers to the possibility of conceiving religion in terms of a historical event of divine establishment. I hope to make clear in the following that the objections against revelation raised by Kant, Fichte, and Hegel emerge from the shared concern that conceding the possibility of such an event would require us to admit that the autonomy of reason

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propre identité dans l'acte de penser, donc dans l'acte de finitiser," Vincent Holzer, "Religion et révélation dans la période moderne. De Kant à Fichte," *Revue théologique de Louvain* 49 (2018): 365-386, here 377.

could be infringed upon by a constraint heterogeneous to the self-imposed structure of human rationality.

Kant's Theology

In the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, the concept of revelation is mentioned only once, with no elaboration on what this notion might entail or whether it can be meaningfully employed.[58] The topic of revelation forms a central concern of Kant's last published text on religion, however, published in 1798 under the title *Der Streit der Fakultäten*. The conclusion of the first part of the treatise in many respects resembles the typical Enlightenment assessment of revealed religion, beginning from the initial opposition of "der reine Religionsglaube (ohne Statuten auf bloßer Vernunft gegründet)" to "der Kirchenglaube, der ganz auf Statuten beruht,…die einer Offenbarung bedurften, wenn sie für heilige Lehre und Lebensvorschriften gelten sollten."[59] This standard division is accompanied by the standard criticisms of the latter. Neither does Kant neglect to refer to the difficulties involved in historical transmission that we have already encountered in Reimarus;[60] nor does he fail to observe that the biblical text contradicts not only itself but also the most established claims of reason, as in the fantastical chronology of the world to which the Bible reconstructs in painstaking detail, "wobei sich doch eine bedenkliche Zahlen-Kabbala in Ansehung der wichtigsten Epochen der heiligen Chronologie darbietet, welche den Glauben an die Authenticität dieser biblischen Geschichtserzählung etwas schwächen dürfte."[61]

If this critical attitude toward Christian revelation echoes formulations typical of the Enlightenment, so too does Kant's conception of the relative value reserved to Christianity after

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[58] Cf. A631/B659.
[59] AA, 7: 37.
[60] AA, 7: 64.
[61] AA, 7: 62.

it has been stripped of its dogmatic content. Although Christianity does not make any unique

contribution to humanity on the level of knowledge, its historical forms are singular in their

pragmatic utility for familiarizing large sections of a society in the rudimentary tenets of

morality:

> Die Bibel war das Vehikel [der Vernunftreligion] vermittelst gewisser
> statutarischer Vorschriften, welche der Ausübung der Religion in der bürgerlichen
> Gesellschaft eine Form als einer Regierung gab, und die Authenticität dieses
> Gesetzbuchs als eines göttlichen (des Inbegriffs aller unserer Pflichten als göttlicher
> Gebote) beglaubigt also und documentirt sich selbst, was den Geist desselben (das
> Moralische) betrifft…[62]

What happens to be the archetypal distortion of religion if taken to be a philosophical truth—that

the requirements of morality are binding because they are authored by a divine lawgiver—turns

out to play an indispensable pedagogical role in conveying the normative character of our self-

legislated moral precepts to the popular understanding. In this sense, the Bible facilitates the

moral development of a society, a development which Kant holds to be the presupposition of any

eventual movement toward rational autonomy. As for the extra-rational claims made in the

Bible, they are accidental to its message and can be spared any serious consideration:

> …was aber den Buchstaben (das Statutarische) desselben anlangt, so bedürfen die
> Satzungen in diesem Buche keiner Beglaubigung, weil sie nicht zum wesentlichen
> (*principale*), sondern nur zum Beigesellten (*accessorium*) desselben gehören.[63]

The only conclusion to draw from these premises is that the Bible contains nothing beyond what

reason can know on the basis of its own resources. Despite Kant's positive assessment of the

moral message of Christianity and his ambivalent conclusion "daß die Bibel, gleich als ob sie

eine göttliche Offenbarung wäre, aufbewahrt, moralisch benutzt und der Religion als ihr

Leitmittel untergelegt zu werden verdiene,"[64] the Bible's divine status is only admitted under the

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[62] AA, 7: 64.
[63] AA, 7: 64.
[64] AA, 7: 65.

modality of this "als ob" and goes no further than its practical contribution to inculcating moral truths.

Declaring the doctrinal content of the Bible to be irrelevant to its true meaning and relegating Christianity to the status of a propaedeutic in this way is a standard deflationary position with many kindred forms from the Enlightenment. With all of this attention devoted to outlining such commonplace conclusions, however, Kant's most severe criticism of religion attracts hardly any attention, embedded as it is in the form of an almost passing remark within the text. Nevertheless, the radicality of this passage is obvious from the fact that it contains an outright denial of the possibility of the kind of revelation whose utility for human society the section is officially engaged in assessing:

> Denn wenn Gott zum Menschen wirklich spräche, so kann dieser doch niemals wissen, daß es Gott sei, der zu ihm spricht. *Es ist schlechterdings unmöglich, daß der Mensch durch seine Sinne den Unendlichen fassen, ihn von Sinnenwesen unterscheiden und ihn woran kennen solle*.[65]

In these brief formulations Kant takes a fundamental step beyond even the most radical formulations of Reimarus. Here, Kant is explicitly thematizing and rejecting the constitutive qualities of revelation that we saw in chapter one. He recognizes, rightly, that the idea of a direct communication from God is equivalent to the experience of an unknowable, infinite phenomenon. Kant's assessment of such an event is that either it would be an empirical phenomenon given through the senses—in which case it would exhibit the conceptual structure of any experience and therefore could not be the manifestation of God—or it would simply not appear to us at all. Neither case provides us with knowledge of God of the sort that revelation is supposed to offer. This claim is based on a substantive account of what it is for an object to be

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[65] AA, 7: 63, emphasis added.

intelligible, where to be intelligible is to exhibit categorial unity.[66] Kant's critique of revelation, unlike that of Reimarus, does not require demonstrating the existence of insurmountable verification difficulties subsequent to the occurrence of such an event, but instead simply draws the necessary conclusion that follows from the hard work done in the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* to demonstrate that a phenomenon not subject to the conceptual structure of our thought can never be known by us. The implication is that we can stop asking about the historical truth of this particular revelation as a problem that is predicated upon a poorly posed question and that we can demystify and discard.

The passage just quoted is all the more striking in that it precedes in the text most of the passages that reiterate a more or less standard Enlightenment approach to the Bible. Strictly speaking, this passage alone should suffice to settle the question of the Bible's divinity, not because it offers a critique of the relative merits of its doctrine, but because it rejects the entire question of divine inspiration as incoherent from the start. Kant does not point out this obvious consequence, but it is everywhere implied by his characterizations of the kind of God philosophy does entitle us to speak about. Kant's God cannot speak in history, *because he can only speak through our own reason*:

> Der Gott, *der durch unsere eigene (moralisch-praktische) Vernunft spricht*, ist ein untrüglicher, allgemein verständlicher Ausleger dieses seines Worts, und es kann auch schlechterdings keinen anderen (etwa auf historische Art) beglaubigten Ausleger seines Worts geben: *weil Religion eine reine Vernunftsache ist*.[67]

The idea of God communicating his will to us through a historical event is unacceptable because it would require that the most important ends of reason are imposed on thought from a source

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[66] In other words, Kant's rejection of revelation is not a product of ignorance or ideological blindness with regard to either the autonomy of reason or the notion of revelation, as Grant Kaplan argues in Kaplan, *Answering the Enlightenment*, 52-53. What makes the criticisms of Kant and his successors so effective is precisely their deep sensitivity to the complex issues at stake in both rationalism and revelation.

[67] AA, 7: 67, emphasis added.

other than reason itself. It is in order to maintain the integrity of this conception of rationality that religion can only be understood as "eine reine Vernunftsache" whose legitimacy is identical with the extent to which it coincides with the self-legislation of reason. This point is brought out with even greater force in his description of biblical exegesis:

> …der Gott in uns ist selbst der Ausleger, weil wir niemand verstehen als den, der durch unsern eigenen Verstand und unsere eigene Vernunft mit uns redet, die Göttlichkeit einer an uns ergangenen Lehre also durch nichts, als durch Begriffe unserer Vernunft, so fern sie rein-moralisch und hiemit untrüglich sind, erkannt werden kann.[68]

Here Kant uses the extraordinary language of "der Gott in uns" to make unequivocally clear that whatever divinity the Bible has is mediated exclusively through "unsern eigenen Verstand und unsere eigene Vernunft," which entails—in his most explicit rejection of the qualities presumed by revelation—that religious truths can be known "durch nichts, als durch Begriffe unserer Vernunft."

This conclusion follows directly upon the premises on which Kant has set up his investigation and harkens back to the original aspirations of the First Critique, far prior to any explicitly theological reflection. Hence, it is no accident that the text we have been examining once again takes up the metaphor of the tribunal in which reason alone can arrive at a verdict on the pretensions of any field of knowledge, including theology:

> Dieser Streit kann und soll nicht durch friedliche Übereinkunft (amicabilis composito) beigelegt werden, sondern bedarf (als Proceß) einer Sentenz, d.i. des rechtskräftigen Spruchs eines Richters (der Vernunft)...[69]

What I am trying to suggest is that if we adopt the autonomy of reason to the extent suggested in the passage above, then we have already excluded the possibility of divine revelation, since such an event would consist of a phenomenon that would transcend the categories of thought. Kant's

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[68] AA, 7: 48.
[69] AA, 7: 33.

recognition of this consequence enabled him to formulate the outlines of a rejection of revelation freed from Reimarus's specious criticisms and emerging from an interrogation of the central issues at stake in divine revelation.

Before leaving Kant, I want to examine one further text that exemplifies his deliberate engagement of the categories of revelation. The single most significant passage with regard to his final position on the possibility of revelation—or at least the only position that he could consistently adopt—appears in a text from 1793, the discussion of mystery in *Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft*.

In a "general remark" inserted between the third and fourth parts of the book, Kant observes the following characteristic of any religion that requires faith in a particular event of revelation:

> In allen Glaubensarten, die sich auf Religion beziehn, stößt das Nachforschen hinter ihrer innern Beschaffenheit unvermeidlich auf ein *Geheimnis*, d. i. auf etwas *Heiliges*, was zwar von jedem einzelnen *gekannt*, aber doch nicht öffentlich *bekannt*, d.i. allgemein mitgeteilt werden kann.[70]

Kant's gloss on mystery as something that cannot be universally communicated is shorthand for saying that it is nonconceptual, that "mystery" amounts to a putative object of knowledge that can be known (at least in a way: *gekannt*) without the possibility of subsuming it under a concept. This passage is crucial because it contains an explicit and precise formulation of the structure of revelation: a phenomenon that can only be known *as* unknowable, whose very intelligibility consists in its eluding conceptual comprehension. It would be difficult to arrive at a more explicit formulation of the issue.

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[70] AA, 6:137.

The majority of the remark is devoted to identifying the characteristics of the moral God, while the opening formulation of the issue cited above goes largely unattended.[71] In fact, the section does not give any further direct discussion of the notion of mystery outlined in the opening paragraph, instead only briefly returning to the broader issue of unknowability. After introducing the qualities of the idea of God presumed in moral action, Kant contrasts the God who is known through practical reason with the God of faith, the mystery of the Divine Trinity:

> Wenn aber eben dieser Glaube (an eine göttliche Dreieinigkeit) nicht bloß als Vorstellung einer praktischen Idee, sondern als ein solcher, der das, was Gott an sich selbst sei, vorstellen solle, betrachtet würde, so würde er *ein alle menschlichen Begriffe übersteigendes, mithin einer Offenbarung für die menschliche Fassungskraft unfähiges Geheimniß* sein und *als ein solches in diesem Betracht* angekündigt werden können. Der Glaube an dasselbe als Erweiterung der theoretischen Erkenntniß von der göttlichen Natur würde nur das Bekenntniß zu einem den Menschen ganz unverständlichen und, wenn sie es zu verstehen meinen, anthropomorphistischen Symbol eines Kirchenglaubens sein…[72]

Here, once again, is a lucid formulation of the epistemology of revelation: a "mystery" that "surpasses all concepts." The crucial part of this passage, Kant's single most explicit statement on revelation, turns on the expression "mithin einer Offenbarung für die menschliche Fassungskraft unfähig." Such a phenomenon would transcend conceptual articulation *and therefore* it cannot form the content of a revelation to a human understanding. In other words, the idea of revelation itself—as an incomprehensible phenomenon—excludes the possibility of there

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[71] The central interpretive difficulty presented by this passage—a difficulty that recurs under different forms throughout the book—is that Kant's aim is to reconfigure our understanding of the term "mystery" so that the notion can be retained and play a role in the moral religion of reason. Thus, in the course of the remark, this initial gloss on mystery as *essentially* nonconceptual comes to be replaced with a notion of mystery as something that, although perfectly knowable in itself, we simply happen to be unable to know; see AA, 6: 142n. In effect, Kant is denying a *strong* notion of mystery—the kind that I have argued to be the basic category of revelation—while affirming the pragmatic value of a *weak* notion of mystery. When I refer to "mystery" in the following, I am referring exclusively to the strong sense of the term that Kant is out to reject. For an example of Kant's rational reinterpretation of theological doctrines, see Ingeborg Schüssler, "Religion rationnelle et religion révélée: L'interprétation pratico-morale de la Trinité chez Kant (avec un aperçu sur son dépassement chez Hegel et Schelling," *Revue de théologie et de philosophie* 62 (2012): 47-72.
[72] AA, 6: 142, emphasis added.

ever being such a revelation to a human understanding. Given the essential claims of critical

philosophy first outlined in the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, there is no room remaining for a

phenomenon that does not correspond to the rational constraints of thought of the kind that a

divine communication would have to be. The concept of revelation can only collapse into an

incoherent self-contradiction. This is why Kant goes on in this passage to say that attempting

nonetheless to hold onto such "mysteries" will leave us grasping at straws, resulting not in an

ineffable idea of the transcendent God, but vulgar superstitions and anthropomorphisms.[73] This

passage should be understood as the final word in Kant's philosophy on revelation, a laborious

rejection of its possibility that necessarily follows from his foundational claim that thought can

exhaustively determine what it is for phenomena to be intelligible.[74]

Although the remarks in these passages are more than sufficient to imply the

impossibility of revelation as a coherent philosophical category, such a conclusion—assuming

Kant wants to draw it—remains obscure and esoteric within the texts we have been discussing.

For one thing, the most explicit polemical statement against confessional Christianity appears in

a letter from a third party whose contents Kant says should not be assumed to represent his own

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[73] It is important to note Kant is not claiming that we might not experience certain phenomena psychologically as if they were incapable of being expressed in a concept. His claim is that such an experience is deceptive and relates only to our subjective perception of the object and do not express a quality of the object itself: "Gefühle sind nicht Erkenntnisse und bezeichnen also auch kein Geheimniß, und da das letztere auf Vernunft Beziehung hat, aber doch nicht allgemein mitgetheilt werden kann, so wird (wenn je ein solches ist) jeder es nur in seiner eignen Vernunft aufzusuchen haben," AA, 6: 138. This is a central premise in the discussion of the aesthetic power of judgment in the *Kritik der Urteilskraft*. The experience of the sublime is the result not of an encounter with an incomprehensible being, but rather of our faculty of perception with respect to an object: "Wir können nicht mehr sagen, als daß der Gegenstand zur Darstellung einer Erhabenheit tauglich sei, die im Gemüthe angetroffen werden kann," AA, 5:245. Formulations like these embody what Heidegger takes to be the cardinal sin of western philosophy, the denial that the preconceptual aspects in a being's mode of appearance are constitutive of the kind of being that it is. On the issues involved here, see the discussion in Thomas Pfau, "On Attention," *Salmagundi* 194 (2017): 127-138.

[74] The rejection of mystery as a category becomes even clearer when juxtaposed to Kant's own formulation of what the content of a rational faith would amount to. In contrast to the religion of faith, a religion that is fundamentally reliant on the category of mystery, Kant describes the moral religion this way: "Dieser Glaube enthält eigentlich kein Geheimniß, weil er lediglich das moralische Verhalten Gottes zum menschlichen Geschlechte ausdrückt; auch bietet er sich aller menschlichen Vernunft von selbst dar und wird daher in der Religion der meisten gesitteten Völker angetroffen," AA, 6: 139.

opinions.[75] Still more significant is the fact that the official Kantian position is that an event of revelation seems to be the only available explanation we have to account for the fact that we are capable of formulating an image of moral perfection, an ideal that he thinks is impossible to deduce from the resources of reason alone.[76] In order to bring out explicitly the full polemic force implied by the commitments of transcendental idealism, it is necessary to turn to the first publication of Johann Gottlieb Fichte.

Fichte's Critique

The *Versuch einer Critik aller Offenbarung* is a curious book.[77] Fichte never intended to publish it and regularly expressed his lack of satisfaction with the text both before and after its public appearance.[78] Although its exact dates of composition cannot be stated with precision, the manuscript was completed sometime in 1791, at which point he included it in an admiring letter to Kant, who he hoped would find the text to be in accord with the spirit of critical philosophy. When he visited Königsberg later that year, Kant seems to have expressed his approval of the work, although he admitted to having read only the first three sections. After Fichte fell into

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[75] See AA, 7: 74-75.

[76] Predictably, Kant's posits this necessity in a passage dripping with ambiguity: "Weil aber doch dieser Glaube, der das moralische Verhältniß der Menschen zum höchsten Wesen zum Behuf einer Religion überhaupt von schädlichen Anthropomorphismen gereinigt und der ächten Sittlichkeit eines Volks Gottes angemessen hat, in einer (der christlichen) Glaubenslehre zuerst und in derselben allein der Welt öffentlich aufgestellt worden: so kann man die Bekanntmachung desselben wohl die Offenbarung desjenigen nennen, was für Menschen durch ihre eigene Schuld bis dahin Geheimniß war," AA, 6: 141. This passage doesn't get us very far toward readmitting the possibility of revelation, however; the only reason that we "may very well" describe the establishment of Christianity as "its [≠ *the*] revelation" is simply that it is the first historical doctrine to promote "publicly" a religion of reason, a religion whose contents contain *no* mystery, that is perfectly transparent to reason. Indeed, Kant even says in this passage that the truth of this religion could only *previously* ("bis dahin") be counted as a mystery (which entails that the Christian "revelation" in question functions by *eliminating* the mystery of morality). If the qualities of revelation described in chapters one and two are even remotely near the mark, then this notion of religion can hardly count as the potential content of an event of divine revelation; and, if Kant is nearly as sensitive to such as I have been arguing here, then it is not implausible to sense an esoteric rejection of revelation behind this exoteric affirmation of it.

[77] Unless noted otherwise, all references are from the following edition: Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *J. G. Fichte-Gesamtausgabe der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, ed. Erich Fuchs et al. (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, 1962-2012), referred to as F. Citations will be given by division, volume, and page number.

[78] See, for instance, his letter of 4 June 1794 to Friedrich August Weißhuhn, in Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Briefwechsel. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Hans Schulz (Leipzig: H. Haessel Verlag, 1925), vol. 1, 371.

financial troubles shortly after his arrival, Kant offered to act as a mediator with a publisher for the manuscript who would provide Fichte with an advance fee to ameliorate his immediate condition. Fichte felt convinced that he would have to rewrite substantial portions before it could be published but eventually relented when Kant and the publisher both insisted that it was satisfactory in its current state. When it appeared in 1792, the publisher omitted Fichte's name and preface in the book, and the similarity of its language to the three Critiques led to the popular belief that Kant was the author, resulting in massive sales of the *Versuch*. When Kant later publicly identified the true author, Fichte was immediately approached about a second edition, which was published in expanded form in 1794. Written several years prior to the lectures that would become the *Wissenschaftslehre*, the book was meant to be a faithful continuation of Kantian philosophy applied to the topic of revelation. The book's terminology is drawn loosely from Kant, from the title to the lengthy portion of the book Fichte calls a "deduction" of the concept of revelation.

Turning to the text, the first obvious question facing such an investigation is why revelation should emerge as a philosophical topic to begin with. It is not self-evident that it should be, even if it is admitted that religion in some broad sense might be philosophically relevant. In Kant's analysis of religion, for instance, which did not appear until the year following Fichte's *Versuch*, only a small portion of the text is dedicated to the topic of revelation, instead focusing almost exclusively on the religious assumptions that must adopted in a coherent theory of morality. Fichte's own explanation of why revelation is a pressing issue is primarily polemical and centers on the danger that revelation might offer a competing account of the concepts that the philosopher claims belong under the heading of practical reason:

> Aber schon durch den ersten flüchtigsten Blick auf diesen Begriff [der Offenbarung] erblicken wir in ihm so viel, das uns auf einen Ursprung desselben a

priori hinzuweisen scheint: den Begriff Gottes, den eines Uebernatürlichen, den einer moralischen Gesetzgebung; alles Begriffe, die nur a priori durch die practische Vernunft möglich sind.[79]

Fichte's aim seems to be to head off a theological encroachment on the domain of philosophy, which he sees as a risk because the concept of revelation entails an implicit account of philosophical concepts like the ones he mentions here. The concern seems to be that, lacking a critique of revelation, we risk falling into a kind of philosophical confusion through a dogmatic contamination of these concepts by way of unreflective theological considerations.

Picking up on Kant's metaphor of the rational tribunal of critique to which all domains are subject, Fichte tries to make clear from the outset that the concept of revelation is only meaningful to the extent that is warranted by the *a priori* critical investigation of reason. Given this assumption, the only non-empirical entry point for thinking about revelation would be to consider it as a function of the moral law, which can only be determined through *a priori* philosophical reflection. Hence the first philosophical thesis that can be derived concerning a hypothetical case of revelation: "Der Endzweck jeder Offenbarung ist reine Moralität."[80] This does not yet entail that revelation cannot include other elements in addition to its moral function. Part of the eventual task of Fichte's critique will be to assess such a possibility, which is left as an open question at the outset. At this point, the only claim is that our only philosophical access

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[79] F, 1.1: 42. Approaching the positive aspects of religion through the lens of morality makes up one of the central concerns in Fichte's earliest preserved manuscripts. In the fragment "Ueber die Absichten des Todes Jesu," for instance, he claims that the purpose of Jesus's death is primarily practical (only through such a fate could he establish the religion of morality), and not soteriological. Thus, justification by the death of Jesus has nothing to do with some kind of theological substitution, but only with the adoption of his moral doctrine. The proper understanding of this doctrine is "daß der Tod Jesu uns vor den Augen Gottes gerecht mache, *indem die Annahme der Lehre Jesu, die durch den Tod Jesu errichtet wurde, das einzige ist, was Gott [von] uns verlangt, mit Aussschließung aller eignen Gerechtigkeit.* Dahin gehören alle Stellen vom *Vergeben, rechtfertigen, gerecht machen…*" F, 2.1: 78.
[80] F, 1.1: 76.

to the concept of revelation would come through the one quality that we know revelation must

have: it would have to make some kind of contribution to our moral existence.

Now, we cannot understand by such a contribution that our moral duties are *established*

by revelation; such a notion would be incompatible with the very idea of morality, which is

identical with a being that legislates its own ends. Indeed, a central aim of the *Versuch* is to

disabuse us of the notion that revelation could play some sort of founding role in morality.[81]

Because revelation cannot establish morality, Fichte draws a conclusion similar to many of the

formulations Kant would develop two years later. Were there to be an event of revelation, its

essential content would be to facilitate our reverence for the moral law by depicting God as the

author of our self-legislating morality:

> Der Begriff der Offenbarung ist also ein Begriff von einer durch übernatürliche
> Causalität von Gott in der Sinnenwelt hervorgebrachten Wirkung, durch welche er
> sich als moralischen Gesetzgeber ankündiget.[82]

Not that God *is* the legislator of morality; it is intrinsic to the idea of morality that this role can

only be performed by reason. Fichte's formulation is not meant to be a statement about morality,

but about how we must think of God: any other concept of God would be theoretically

nonsensical, since doing so would place God outside of the moral law and therefore of reason.

Fichte does not dwell on whether it is consistent to hold both of these claims simultaneously,

since his only purpose in introducing the concept of a divine lawgiver is to consider a

hypothetical case of revelation insofar as it could be an object of *a priori* philosophical

reflection.[83] If there were an event of revelation—and Fichte is not claiming there has been or

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[81] This is especially clear in the prefatory discussion of the will that Fichte included in the second edition; see F, 1.1: 146-149.

[82] F, 1.1: 41; see also F, 1.1: 77.

[83] Kant's explanation for the necessity of thinking of a divine lawgiver despite the fact that reason legislates its own ends has to do with the transition from thinking of morality as an individual affair to conceiving of it as a collective project. The statement that God is the author of the moral law does not represent a factual claim, but instead plays

will be such an event—then the only rationally consistent content it could have would be the

disclosure of God as morality.[84] This entails as a consequence that revelation comprising

anything other than God as the author of morality can be antecedently rejected at the level of *a*

priori speculation:

> Jede Offenbarung also muss uns Gott als moralischen Gesetzgeber ankündigen, und
> nur von derjenigen, deren Zweck das ist, können wir aus moralischen Gründen
> glauben, daß sie von Gott sey.[85]

These statements are remarkable because they amount to the claim that thought can determine

for itself what the message of divine revelation would have to be, and it can do this without

needing to examine the religious content of specific historical candidates. Again, all of this

follows directly from the foundational premise stated clearly on the opening pages of the First

Critique, that there is no domain of human experience whose rational legitimacy is not secured

by reason, understood as a capacity of discursive judgment. It is already implicit in this claim

that revelation could never tell us anything that transcends human reason, which means that

revelation could only consist of truths that reason is capable of legislating for itself.

Nevertheless, Fichte does not infer from this that the notion of revelation is empty and

can be rejected out of hand. Much of the heavy lifting of Fichte's *Versuch* involves attempting to

show that adopting the idea of revelation—so understood—does not involve us in contradictions

with our other philosophical claims. His principal approach follows good Kantian logic, that the

subject matter of religion is moral rather than theoretical, so it would amount to a category

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the pragmatic role of expressing morality as common to the different individuals within a community. The full
discussion is at AA, 6: 98-100.

[84] On what Fichte thinks we stand to gain by considering morality in combination with a concept of revelation, see
George di Giovanni, *Freedom and Religion in Kant and His Immediate Successors: The Vocation of Humankind,
1774–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 210-212.

[85] F, 1.1: 76-77. See also F, 1.1: 84: "Nur diejenige Offenbarung, welche ein Princip der Moral, welches mit dem
Princip der praktischen Vernunft übereinkommt, und lauter solche moralische Maximen aufstellt, welche sich davon
ableiten lassen, kann von Gott seyn."

mistake to fear that revelation could come into conflict with our knowledge of the world. Fichte

thinks that both the philosopher and the theologian are liable to succumb to such a mistake,

however, issuing in an antinomy which neither side can resolve in its favor:

> Das Resultat des hier gesagten ist, daß, so wenig es dem dogmatischen Vertheidiger des Offenbarungsbegriffs erlaubt werden dürfe, aus der Unerklärbarkeit einer gewissen Erscheinung aus Naturgesetzen auf eine übernatürliche Kausalität, und wol gar geradezu auf die Kausalität Gottes zu schließen; eben so wenig sey es dem dogmatischen Gegner desselben zu verstatten, aus der Erklärbarkeit eben dieser Erscheinungen aus Naturgesetzen zu schließen, daß sie weder durch übernatürliche Kausalität überhaupt, noch insbesondre durch Kausalität Gottes möglich seyen. *Die ganze Frage darf gar nicht dogmatisch, nach theoretischen Principien, sondern sie muß moralisch, nach Principien der praktischen Vernunft, erörtert werden...*[86]

The moral function that Fichte attributes to revelation is of a fundamentally different order than

our theoretical knowledge of the world. Considered in this regard, revelation is not a matter of

knowledge at all, but rather concerns only right action. It is by thinking of revelation primarily in

terms of knowledge that both critics and apologists of revelation fall into an endless circle of

irresolvable argumentation. Fichte's solution is that there is no problem in admitting a notion of

revelation for use in philosophical reflection so long as we attend only to its moral aspect.

This conclusion marks the penultimate step in the final rejection of any transcendent

quality in revelation, as we will see shortly. First, however, it is necessary to say something

about the kind of revelation that Fichte does allow as compatible with reason. The *Versuch* is

clear from the beginning that its arguments take place at the level of *a priori* philosophical

speculation, and therefore necessarily abstract from any claims about the facticity of revelation,

claims that relate to the realm the *a posteriori* fact. In addition to this initial abstraction that is

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[86] F, 1.1: 74, emphasis added. Fichte had earlier made a similar argument regarding Christianity and Deism in the fragment "Einige Aphorismen über Religion und Deismus." There he argues that Christianity is only concerned with moral practice, whereas Deism is a matter of theoretical speculation. There is no inherent reason why the two should stand in opposition to one another, and a proper understanding of Deism can even assist in the Christian religious project: "Dieses rein deistische System widerspricht der christlichen Religion nicht, sondern läßt ihr ihre ganze subjective Gültigkeit; es verfälscht sie nicht, denn es kommt mit ihr nirgends in Collision; es hat keinen schädlichen, sondern bei dem, der es ganz übersieht, einen überaus nützlichen Einfluß auf Moralität," F, 2.1: 314.

entailed by the nature of the undertaking, however, Fichte also admits that philosophy has no

way of knowing if revelation would actually benefit human beings. Here is how he puts the issue

in his preparatory remark regarding the modality of his investigation:

> Das von der reinen Vernunft aus vermißte, nur in der Erfahrung mögliche Datum
> zu diesem Begriffe, daß nemlich moralische Wesen gegeben seyen, welche ohne
> Offenbarung der Moralität unfähig seyn würden, wird als Hypothese vorausgesetzt,
> und eine Deduktion des Offenbarungsbegriffs hat nicht die Wirklichkeit desselben
> darzuthun, welches sie ohnehin als Deduktion a priori für ein empirisches Datum
> nicht leisten könnte, sondern es ist für sie völlig hinreichend, wenn diese
> Voraussetzung sich nur nicht widerspricht, und demnach nur vollkommen denkbar
> ist.[87]

Revelation is only a meaningful concept if it actually serves some end. It would only make sense

for there to be a revelation if we needed it in some way. Since revelation is essentially a matter of

morality, admitting that there has been a divine revelation to human beings would be to admit

simultaneously that we need revelation in order to fulfill some aspect of our moral vocation. If

we did not have such a need, revelation would be an empty redundancy:

> Der Begriff der Offenbarung a priori setzt ein empirisch gegebnes moralisches
> Bedürfniß derselben voraus, ohne welches sich die Vernunft eine Veranstaltung der
> Gottheit, die dann überflüssig, und gänzlich zwecklos war, nicht als moralisch
> möglich denken konnte…[88]

It should be noted right away that, in saying this, Fichte is not retracting any of his claims about

the autonomy of reason and its self-legislation of the moral law. The hypothetical circumstance

that he is entertaining is specific to the potential needs that might pertain to beings who are both

rational and sensible. The idea is that, even though such beings would still be autonomously

bound to morality by virtue of reason, the configuration of their sensible appetites could come

into conflict with the moral law to prevent its realization. In such a case, the function of

revelation would not be to impose morality upon reason, but to render its fulfillment empirically

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[87] F, 1.1: 50.
[88] F, 1.1: 75.

possible. This function would be analogous to other empirical conditions that are presuppositions

of a moral existence, such as proper socialization and educational institutions, or a society whose

mores do not prohibit an existence guided by moral principles, The question is whether humans

actually do find themselves in a similar situation with respect to revelation.[89]

In a lengthy discussion of whether revelation is an empirical presupposition of morality

given our factual condition, Fichte finds that the question cannot be answered either way and that

the hypothetical premise on which the entire argument rests cannot be demonstrated

philosophically. He does suggest, however, that the nature of practical philosophy gives evidence

in favor of the redundancy of revelation, in the sense that a morally self-sufficient humanity

would be a more rationally satisfactory circumstance than one in which humans require

revelation to achieve their final moral end:

> …so läßt sich auch nicht leugnen, daß es weit ehrenvoller für die Menschheit seyn
> würde, wenn die Naturreligion stets hinlänglich wäre, sie in jedem Falle zum
> Gehorsam gegen das Moralgesetz zu bestimmen: und in diesem Sinne können denn
> beide Sätze wohl beisammenstehen, nemlich, daß sich a priori (vor der wirklich
> gemachten Erfahrung) nicht einsehen lasse, warum die Vorstellung einer
> Offenbarung nöthig seyn sollte, um die gehemmte Freiheit herzustellen; daß aber
> die fast allgemeine Erfahrung in uns und andern uns fast täglich belehre, daß wir
> allerdings schwach genug sind, einer dergleichen Vorstellung zu bedürfen.[90]

In other words, there is no philosophical reason to think that revelation is a necessary empirical

condition for free moral action, in the same way as just laws or the reliable satisfaction of basic

human needs. The fact that humans seem to act immorally with regularity is sufficient to leave

open the possibility that we might need revelation, but this mere possibility is all that reason

gives to us. If it were the case that revelation is a precondition of morality, such a reliance would

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[89] Kant seems to have claimed that human beings do have such a need that they cannot fulfill themselves, which he
describes with the notion of radical evil. See AA, 6: 32-39, as well as the helpful summary and discussion of the
relevant interpretive issues in Henry E. Allison, "On the Very Idea of a Propensity to Evil," *The Journal of Value
Inquiry* 36 (2002): 337-348.
[90] F, 1.1: 69

be a brute fact about our constitution that would allow of no further insight or explanation, which is sufficient to make this conclusion an unpalatable one. Given the additional fact that there are explanations for the existence of human evil that do not involve appealing to revelation, the philosophical prospects that Fichte leaves to revelation are quite small, even in the very thin form that he has reduced it to.

The point of all of this is that Fichte thinks the results of his deduction are valid only to the extent that his arguments abstract from any claims about the actuality of revelation and therefore also from the specific historical content that would be involved in a factual case of revelation. This weakens his apparently positive assessment of revelation, as his final conclusion ultimately amounts to the claim that there is nothing logically contradictory in the idea of God becoming manifest in the sensible world, provided that the essential content of revelation is God's status as a moral lawgiver. Fichte's approval of the concept of revelation in the first part of the book is due to these two presuppositions: abstraction from the specificity of any particular case of revelation and the assumption that *what* is revealed is simply a rational truth that can be grasped by practical reason itself. With all of these qualifications on the table, Fichte takes it that he has sufficiently demonstrated how it is that even revelation stands exclusively under the jurisdiction of reason and that we can proceed to determine the qualities that such a revelation would necessarily exhibit:

> …*so ist es offenbar Sache der Vernunft, zu entscheiden, ob diese gegebne Erscheinung mit ihrem Begriffe von derselben übereinkomme, oder nicht; und sie erwartet demnach von ihr so wenig das Gesetz, daß sie vielmehr es ihr selbst vorschreibt.* Aus ihr müssen sich ferner alle Bedingungen ergeben, unter denen eine Erscheinung als göttliche Offenbarung angenommen werden kann: nemlich, sie kann es nur insofern, als sie mit diesem deducirten Begriffe übereinstimmt. Diese Bedingungen nennen wir Kriterien der Göttlichkeit einer Offenbarung.[91]

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[91] F, 1.1: 49.

These "criteria of the divinity of a revelation" are those which follow from the principles that

Fichte has set up for revelation. The remainder of the book is a primarily negative application of

these criteria to any potnetial content of revelation that does not fall under its moral function.

This leads us into the really pressing question about revelation, what we presumably were

after when we started asking about revelation to begin with: whether it can teach us something

beyond the capacity of our knowledge.[92] When Fichte begins to examine this issue, he assures us

that we need not be troubled by the negative answer he is clearly preparing us for, since such an

answer would still allow us to keep the thin notion of revelation on the terms that he has defined

it:

> Können wir von einer Offenbarung Belehrungen und Aufklärungen erwarten, auf
> die unsre sich selbst überlassene, und durch keine übernatürliche Hülfe geleitete
> Vernunft nicht etwa blos unter den zufälligen Bedingungen, unter denen sie sich
> befunden hat, und befindet, sondern überhaupt ihrer Natur nach nie würde haben
> kommen können? und wir können desto ruhiger zu ihrer Beantwortung schreiten,
> da wir, im Falle daß, wir sie verneinen müßten, nach obiger Deduktion, laut welcher
> es uns eigentlich um die Form der Offenbarung zu thun war, nicht mehr den
> Einwurf zu befürchten haben: die Offenbarung sey überhaupt überflüssig, wenn sie
> uns nichts neues habe lehren können.[93]

The subsequent discussion contains some of the arguments we have encountered already in

Kant.[94] His principal claim is that this kind of revelation is at once theoretically unnecessary and

practically incoherent. Since new knowledge of the essence of God would not contribute

anything to our inclination to follow the moral law, it could only be futile in advancing the

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[92] In an earlier passage that was present in the first edition but removed from the 1794 edition, Fichte had already
responded to this question by observing that any new concepts God tried to give us would be unintelligible and
therefore useless to us because they would necessarily transcend reason: "…hätte nun dieser Mensch keinen Begriff
von Gott und von Pflicht…und wenn wir wollen, daß er jene Wahrheiten durch diese Ankündigung erst *lernen* soll,
so müssen wir dies annehmen…so könnte er sie auch durch diese Ankündigung nicht bekommen, denn es sind
Begriffe, die in keiner Naturphilosophie enthalten sind. Er würde von dem, was er hörte, schlechterdings nichts
verstehen; es würden ihm Begirffe aus einer andern Welt seyn, wie sie es denn sind," F, 1.1: 46.
[93] F, 1.1: 78.
[94] For instance, the claim that the supersensible cannot appear to us, since it could only do so by appearing in the
sensible conditions under which alone objects can present themselves to us; F, 1.1: 80.

purpose of revelation.[95] With respect to the possibility that revelation could expand our moral

obligations beyond those dictated by reason, Fichte argues that this too would be an absurdity,

since this would amount to God requiring of us non-rational duties, an action which is

inconceivable for a rational God to perform.[96]

His most ambitious argument, however, is that the idea of a supernatural revelation

conveying truths that cannot be derived by reason alone contradicts the very idea of revelation.

Fichte consistently infers from his initial notion of revelation, according to which its content and

function are subordinate to the requirements of human reason, that the possibility of revelation

containing anything that transcends reason must thereby be logically impossible. Here is the

passage in full:

> Widerspricht endlich eine solche Erwartung nicht etwa der Natur der Offenbarung? Da Belehrungen dieser Art an unsere durch das Moralgesetz bestimmte Vernunft gar nicht gehalten werden könnten, um sie an ihr zu versuchen, ob sie mit derselben übereinkämen, oder nicht, indem sie auf diesen Principien sich gar nicht gründeten (denn wenn sie sich darauf gründeten, so müßte unsre sich selbst überlassene Vernunft ohne alle fremde Beihülfe darauf haben kommen können); so könnte der Glaube an ihre Wahrheit sich auf nichts gründen, als etwa auf die göttliche Autorität, auf welche eine Offenbarung sich beruft. Nun aber findet für diese göttliche Autorität selbst kein andrer Glaubensgrund statt, als die Vernunftmäßigkeit (die Übereinstimmung nicht mit der vernünftelnden, sondern mit der moralischgläubigen Vernunft,) der Lehren, die auf sie gegründet werden: mithin kann diese göttliche Autorität nicht selbst wieder Beglaubigungsgrund dessen seyn, was erst der ihrige werden soll.[97]

At this point, we are at the heart of the principled criticism of revelation that was first suggested

by Kant. The key premise of this passage is the sentence: "Nun aber findet für göttliche Autorität

selbst kein andrer Glaubensgrund statt, als die Vernunftmäßigkeit…der Lehren." As I argued at

length in chapter one, to adopt this principle as the criterion of revelation is to reject the basic

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[95] F, 1.1: 79-80.
[96] F, 1.1: 81-82.
[97] F, 1.1: 80.

thought of revelation, a consequence at which Fichte arrives when he concludes that the idea of knowledge that transcends human concepts contradicts the very idea of reason. That Fichte recognizes this is even more evident in his conclusion:

> Es ist also weder moralisch noch theoretisch möglich, daß eine Offenbarung uns Belehrungen gebe, auf die unsre Vernunft nicht ohne sie hätte kommen können und sollen…[98]

In light of these passages, Fichte was clearly aware of the negative implications of critical philosophy with respect to revelation. To be sure, he takes great pains to assure us that there is still a place for the concept of revelation and that we need not dispense with the concept altogether. Nevertheless, his thin notion of the manifestation of God as reason hardly compensates for this patent rejection of revelation in any recognizable sense of the term. This fact, taken together with his distinct ambivalence about whether even this concept of revelation is philosophically admissible, leaves little room to doubt the true intent of Fichte's treatise.

The claim that only reason could warrant the claims of revelation is only a specific application of the fundamental commitment of Kant's critical turn: discursive reason alone can warrant what it is for an object to be intelligible, regardless of what kind of object may present itself. This brings us back to where we began, with McDowell and the "boundlessness of the conceptual." Fichte's advance in the narrative I am tracing consists in making explicit what in Kant remains largely implicit. His thorough examination of the possibility that revelation could tell us something that surpasses the capacity of reason—and his resounding response in the negative—makes clear just how dire the kind of rationalism initiated by Kant is for the possibility of revelation. Fichte's rejection of revelation is thorough and exhaustive: if we accept Kant's initial premises, there is no room for anything like the concept of divine revelation of the

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[98] F, 1.1: 82.

transcendent mystery of God. The only remaining task in a complete critique of revelation is to explain why it is that this idea has remained so deeply fixed in western thought if it is, in fact, fundamentally incoherent. It his Hegel who takes this final step in the Idealist rejection of revelation.

Hegel and the History of Religion

Fichte's argument in his *Versuch einer Critik aller Offenbarung* should be sufficient to remove any remaining doubt regarding the catastrophic implications of critical philosophy for the concept of divine revelation. On the logical level, Fichte has demonstrated that the notion of a transcendent God disclosing knowledge that surpasses our rational capacities is incompatible with the fundamental conclusion of the First Critique, that nothing can be given to us to know that does not have a categorial structure. In this sense, there is very little left for Hegel to do in terms of the logical critique of revelation. What remains, however, is a historical problem for which the Enlightenment was unable to find a satisfactory answer: supposing we admit that the theoretical assumptions of religions that rely on revelation are demonstrably wrong, what are we to make of the fact that this notion has played a central role in European self-understanding in the centuries since the emergence of Christianity? It seems unlikely that such sustained commitments to the ideas of revelation and finitude could be explained as a simple matter of philosophical ignorance or the absence of some natural discovery.[99] Apart from the fact that such an explanation would be unsatisfactory from an explanatory point of view, a notion of history being at bottom illogical in this way would also threaten the confidence we might have in the positions of our own age. It was Hegel's ambition to show that the claims, practices, and even

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[99] The formulations in this paragraph are indebted to the discussion in Robert B. Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem: On the Dissatisfactions of European High Culture*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 1-15.

confessional beliefs of Christianity are historical phenomena that admit of rational explanation in

the same way as does the emergence of modern liberal democratic states based on a conception

of private rights, or the collapse of a historically distinctive form of art. By claiming this, Hegel

sought to undermine the opposition between eternal and historical truth that was foundational for

virtually every philosophical controversy of the first half of the 18th century and remained a

central assumption for both Kant and Fichte.[100] Doing so enabled Hegel to provide the Kantian

and Fichtean critique with a historical genealogy of the notion of revelation and its grip on

western society, along with an explanation of the distinctively modern possibility of overcoming

the abstract opposition of God and world.[101]

Needless to say, the point of departure for Hegel's conception of religion rests on the

same rationalist premises first articulated by Kant: "Die Vernunft ist der Boden, auf dem die

Religion allein zu Hause sein kann."[102] And, once again following Kant and Fichte, such

rationalism entails that an incomprehensible God would be strictly unintelligible to us and hence

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[100] The most powerful expression of the distinction in question is, of course, Lessing's in *Über den Beweis des Geistes und der Kraft*: "zufällige Geschichtswahrheiten können der Beweis von notwendigen Vernunftswahrheiten nie werden," Lessing, *Werke*, vol. 8, 441. On the complicated prehistory to this formulation of the issue, see Friedrich Vollhardt, "'Enthusiasmus der Spekulation'. Zur fehlenden Vorgeschichte von Lessings Erziehungslehre," in *Lessings Religionsphilosophie im Kontext. Hamburger Fragmente und Wolfenbütteler Axiomata*, ed. Christoph Bultmann and Friedrich Vollhardt (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 2011), 104-125. In *Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts* and *Ernst und Falk*, Lessing himself made the decisive first step toward the rejection of such a strict division; see Hugh B. Nisbet, "The Rationalisation of the Holy Trinity from Lessing to Hegel," *Lessing Yearbook* 31 (1999): 65-89.

[101] Kant, of course, had already reflected a great deal on our intellectual investment in the rationality of history; this is why he insists that it is necessary for us to think of the Bible *as if* it were divinely inspired, because otherwise we would incline toward a conception of history as governed by contingency and therefore opposed to our rational interests: "Die Beurkundung einer solchen Schrift, als einer göttlichen, kann von keiner Geschichtserzählung, sondern nur von der erprobten Kraft derselben, Religion in menschlichen Herzen zu gründen und, wenn sie durch mancherlei (alte oder neue) Satzungen verunartet wäre, sie durch ihre Einfalt selbst wieder in ihre Reinigkeit herzustellen, abgeleitet werden, *welches Werk darum nicht aufhört, Wirkung der Natur und Erfolg der fortschreitenden moralischen Cultur in dem allgemeinen Gange der Vorsehung zu sein, und als eine solche erklärt zu werden bedarf, damit die Existenz dieses Buchs nicht ungläubisch dem bloßen Zufall, oder abergläubisch einem Wunder zugeschrieben werde, und die Vernunft in beiden Fällen auf den Strand gerathe*," AA, 7: 64, emphasis added. For Kant, however, construing history as rational in this way is only a subjective constraint on how we must think, a principle of organizing our claims, rather than an objective insight into the nature of historical development.

[102] H, XVI: 196.

could not come to have theoretical or practical value for human beings: "Und was, müssen wir weiter fragen, was wäre denn sonst der Mühe wert zu begreifen, wenn Gott unbegreiflich ist?"[103] Hegel is even more emphatic than both other thinkers that we can only think of God in conceptual terms; indeed, he goes so far as to say that the only way we can conceive of divinity would be as embodying a unique kind of conceptuality, what he calls the "absolute concept": "wir [nennen] aber den *absoluten Begriff* die *göttliche* Natur."[104]

It is hardly surprising therefore that Hegel's critique of the concept of revelation—at least in the sense we typically give to this term—more or less follows the same argument as the one we saw in Fichte. The problem with revelation is that it entertains the idea that our knowledge of the most divine subject matter is external to reason and is acquired through an imposition from without:

> Die Religion mag einen Inhalt haben, welchen sie will; ihr Inhalt, festgehalten auf dem Standpunkt des Bewußtseins, ist ein drübenstehender, und wenn auch die Bestimmung der Offenbarung dazu kommt, so ist der Inhalt doch ein gegebener und äußerlicher für uns. Es kommt bei einer solchen Vorstellung, daß der göttliche Inhalt nur gegeben, nicht zu erkennen, nur passiv im Glauben zu behalten sei…[105]

If the concept of revelation entails that our knowledge of the divine is given to us by an act of God, then this knowledge can only be acquired passively: through faith, and *not* through knowledge. Hegel's concern is that this means that the content of revelation can never be our own or find a place among our other rational claims, since our knowledge of God would be of a different order from the spontaneous character of reason that forms the basis of all knowledge. A phenomenon of revelation would have to be outside of our conceptual space of reasons, and, for

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[103] H, XVI: 44.
[104] H, XVII: 205. See also XVI: 41: "die *Vernunft* ist selbst die *Sache*, der Geist, der göttliche Geist."
[105] H, XVII: 191.

this very reason, it could never form the object of a meaningful judgment.[106] Thus, it would be

incoherent to conceive of revelation as the disclosure of supernatural natural knowledge that we

can only have through the event of revelation:

> Dies ist ein großer Grundsatz, den wir wesentlich festhalten müssen; es liegt das
> darin, daß positive Offenbarung nicht so Religion bewirken kann, daß sie ein
> mechanisch Hervorgebrachtes, von außen Gewirktes und in den Menschen
> Gesetztes wäre.[107]

Instead of a conception of religion in which knowledge of the divine is instituted through

an act on the part of the transcendent God, Hegel insists that, whatever religion is, it gives us

nothing that is not already (at least implicitly) within the grasp of human rational capacities. This

is essential, because if religion is to have any legitimate role in human life, it can only do so by

virtue of the fact that reason deems it to have such a role:

> Religion, Recht, Sittlichkeit, alles Geistige werde im Menschen nur aufgeregt; er
> sei Geist an sich, die Wahrheit liege in ihm, und es handle sich nur darum, daß sie
> zum Bewußtsein gebracht werde. Der Geist gibt Zeugnis dem Geist; dies Zeugnis
> ist die eigene, innere Natur des Geistes. Es ist diese wichtige Bestimmung darin,
> daß die Religion nicht äußerlich in den Menschen hineingebracht ist, sondern in
> ihm selbst, in seiner Vernunft, Freiheit überhaupt liegt.[108]

Ironically, the fact that this emphasis on the concept as the basis of religion is incompatible with

a substantive notion of revelation is nowhere more clearly expressed than in his discussion of

Christianity as "die geoffenbarte Religion" in the religion lectures. Hearkening back to earlier

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[106] One way of emphasizing the claim I've been trying to make in this chapter, that the criticism of revelation on the basis of Kantian rationalism marks a fundamental step beyond the Enlightenment rejection of miracles, is to compare the formulations I have just cited which focus on "externality" with Hegel's critique of revelation in one of his earliest fragments, *Die Positivität in der christlichen Religion*: "Jesus [verlangte] nicht wegen dieser seiner Wunder, sondern wegen seiner Lehre Glauben…ewige Wahrheiten [können] ihrer Natur nach, wenn sie notwendig und allgemeingültig sein sollen, auf das Wesen der Vernunft allein, nicht auf für die Vernunft zufällige Erscheinungen der äußeren Sinnenwelt gegründet werden," H, I: 116-117. This sentence, which could just as well have been drawn from Reimarus's *Apologie*, was written nearly two decades prior to the formulation of the Encyclopedia project, before *Glauben und Wissen* or even *Das älteste Systemprogramm des deutschen Idealismus*. It is no accident, I want to say, that there is such a shift in Hegel's language concerning revelation, and that this is a direct consequence of his intense engagement with Kant and, especially, Fichte that intervened between this early text and the writings from his Jena period.
[107] H, XVI: 160.
[108] H, XVI: 160.

theological debates, this section focuses on what Hegel calls the "positivity" of religion, the role

played by empirical historical circumstances in our adoption of religious beliefs. Omitting any

consideration of divine revelation properly speaking, the discussion is entirely dedicated to

responding to the objection that Christianity is ultimately irrational because we are only

Christians on account of our contingent social upbringing. Hegel insists that even if individuals

might owe their religious beliefs to empirical circumstances, these beliefs themselves still form

part of a nexus of social and historical developments that are demonstrably rational when taken

as a totality. Thus, while there is a certain positivity in Christianity, it ultimately derives rational

authority from the concept alone:

> Indem wir diese Religion betrachten, gehen wir nicht historisch zu Werke nach der
> Weise des Geistes, der vom Äußerlichen anfängt, sondern wir gehen
> vom *Begriff* aus…Daß wir auf der andern Seite vom Positiven anfingen, ist in der
> Erziehung geschehen und notwendig, hier aber auf der Seite zu lassen, insofern wir
> wissenschaftlich verfahren.[109]

This conclusion clearly has nothing to do with revelation in the recognizable sense of the term.

All Hegel leaves us of revelation in his discussion of "die geoffenbarte Religion" is the very thin

dimension of pedagogical positivity that derives from the fact that no person can acquire religion

except through individual catechesis or some process of socialization. Even though Hegel is

happy to use this term that is historically connected with the notion of revelation, he employs it

in such an attenuated sense that any bond between positivity and revelation has been cleanly

severed. At the end of this section, nothing is left of revelation worthy of the name.

At this point, nothing we have seen in Hegel's account has moved us very far beyond

Kant and Fichte. His real contribution only comes into view in reference to his account of *Geist*,

Hegel's term of art for collective human mindedness, a mindedness that is at once self-conscious,

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[109] H, XVII: 202-203.

intersubjective, and historical. A defining element of this distinctly Hegelian account of reason is

that *Geist* does not exist as a static entity, as if giving an account of human rationality were

simply a matter of rigorous self-reflection on the unchanging conceptual structures that are

always there. In Brandom's formulation, reason has a history, not a nature: *Geist* is not given, it

is achieved.[110] This achievement comes about as the artistic, philosophical, and cultural

productions of a given historical period establish the self-understanding of *Geist* by manifesting

to *Geist* what its commitments actually are.[111] Religion, too, is a practice whose essential

function is to serve as one of the means through which *Geist* comes to recognize itself:

> Erst diese Identität, daß das Wissen in seinem Objekt sich für sich setzt, ist der
> Geist, die Vernunft, die als gegenständlich für sich selbst ist. Die Religion also ist
> Beziehung des Geistes auf den absoluten Geist. Nur so ist der Geist *als der*
> *wissende das Gewußte*.[112]

Unlike classical Christian theology, religion does not function as an agent of mediation between

us and the transcendent God, but nor is it a function of moral pedagogy as in Kant and Fichte.

Instead, the task of religion is to allow reason to become "als gegenständlich für sich selbst": to

constitute a kind of self-relationship of *Geist* to itself consisting essentially in self-knowledge.

With these formulations, we are on the threshold of Hegel's contribution to the

deconstruction of revelation that I have been tracing in this chapter. This contribution is based on

two features of the Hegelian account of religion. First, as is implied in the above passage,

religious practices and beliefs are a product of *Geist* in its project of achieving adequate

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[110] Robert Brandom, *A Spirit of Trust: A Reading of Hegel's Phenomenology* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2019), 469.
[111] On the conative role of cultural productions in the coming-to-be of *Geist*'s knowledge of itself, see Robert B. Pippin, "You Can't Get There from Here: Transition Problems in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hegel*, ed. Frederick C. Beiser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 52-85.
[112] H, XVI: 197.

knowledge of itself. His entire theory about this function of religion is on view in the following

dense passage:

> Dies ist nicht bloß ein *Verhalten* des Geistes zum absoluten Geist, sondern der
> absolute Geist selbst ist *das Sichbeziehende* auf das, was wir als Unterschied auf
> die andere Seite gesetzt haben, und höher ist so die Religion die Idee des Geistes,
> der sich zu sich selbst verhält, *das Selbstbewußtsein des absoluten Geistes*.[113]

I take it that the first distinction Hegel draws here, between "ein [bloßes] Verhalten des Geistes

zum absoluten Geist," on the one hand, and "der absolute Geist" as "das Sichbeziehende" on the

other is equivalent to the difference between the traditional idea of religion and the Hegelian

alternative. According to the former, religious belief is a means for humanity ("Geist") to gain

access to ("Verhalten") the divine ("absoluter Geist") that is outside of the human world. On the

view Hegel is proposing, religious content and images ("das, was *wir* als Unterschied auf die

andere Seite *gesetzt* haben") are produced by *Geist* ("das Sichbeziehende") to relate not to God,

but to itself. Of course, religion does use the image of a God distinct from humanity ("das, was

wir *als Unterschied auf die andere Seite* gesetzt haben"), but this is an image we produce to

conceive of ourselves, and we will be committing the cardinal Hegelian sin if we take the

distinction between God and world to be an ontological distinction, rather than an instrument of

self-reflection (more on this shortly). Hence the conclusion that religion is "die Idee des Geistes,

der sich zu sich selbst verhält, *das Selbstbewußtsein des absoluten Geistes*." Here we can see

why Hegel attributes an indispensable role to religion, although it will only be able to play this

role in a thoroughly secularized form. Although he has rejected the doctrine of divine revelation,

he does not take this to reduce confessional religious practices to a kind of dogmatism or

intellectual confusion, a logical mistake to be cured by proper philosophical reflection. Instead,

Hegel wants us to see that human religious practices and beliefs are indispensable elements of

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[113] H, XVI: 197-198.

establishing the kind of self-relationship that *Geist* is. Without religion—including confessional

practices and theological doctrines—the self-knowledge that Hegel has identified as the essential

function of *Geist* would be impossible.[114]

The second feature of Hegelian philosophy of religion has to do with the specific mode in

which religion manifests the Absolute. In the domain of Absolute Spirit—the set of practices

through which *Geist* comes to understand itself—what separates religion from art or philosophy

is that it represents the Absolute under the modality of *Vorstellung*, which depicts our deepest

ethical claims through a kind of picture thinking.[115] In Hegel's gloss on this function in the

passage we have been following, this means that it is the distinct task of religion to convey the

Absolute, the infinite, in the medium of *finitude*:

> …so daß er sich zu verendlichen hat, um durch diese Verendlichung Wissen seiner
> selbst zu werden. So ist die Religion Wissen des göttlichen Geistes von sich *durch
> Vermittlung des endlichen Geistes*.[116]

The catch, of course, is that this mode of presentation inevitably misconstrues the Absolute,

insofar as it presents the Absolute, which is *not* finite, in some finite modality.[117] So, for

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[114] It is one of Hegel's earliest ideas that religion plays a role in society that is independent from and just as essential to it as theoretical truth and moral common life, and that this role has something to do with the unique capacity of religion to provide us with self-knowledge regarding the nature of our ethical community. Here is a particularly beautiful expression of this thought in a passage from *Der Geist des Christentums und sein Schicksal*: "Ein Kreis der Liebe, ein Kreis von Gemütern, die ihre Rechte an alles Besondere gegeneinander aufgeben und nur durch gemeinschaftlichen Glauben und Hoffnung vereinigt sind, deren Genuß und Freude allein diese reine Einmütigkeit der Liebe ist, ist ein kleines Reich Gottes; aber ihre Liebe ist nicht Religion, denn die Einigkeit, die Liebe der Menschen enthält nicht zugleich die Darstellung dieser Einigkeit. Liebe vereinigt sie, aber die Geliebten erkennen diese Vereinigung nicht; wo sie erkennen, erkennen sie Abgesondertes. Daß das Göttliche erscheine, muß der unsichtbare Geist mit sichtbarem vereinigt sein, daß alles in einem, Erkenntnis und Empfinden, daß eine vollständige Synthese, eine vollendete Harmonie, daß Harmonie und das Harmonische eins sei. Sonst bleibt in Beziehung auf das Ganze der trennbaren Natur ein Trieb, der für die Unendlichkeit der Welt zu klein und für ihre Objektivität zu groß ist und nicht gesättigt werden kann; es bleibt der unauslöschliche unbefriedigte Trieb nach Gott," H, I: 407.
[115] Cf. the full discussion of this mode of Absolute Spirit in H, XVI: 139-151.
[116] H, XVI: 198.
[117] On the inability to express as *Vorstellung* what can only be expressed philosophically, see John McCumber, *The Company of Words: Hegel, Language, and Systematic Philosophy* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 55. It should be emphasized, however, that religion's inability to depict with perfect precision what can only be expressed in speculative philosophy should not be taken as a criticism. Religion is different from philosophy, and it primarily serves to convey to us the idea that our subjective beliefs and commitments are not *merely* subjective,

instance, societies divinize objects in nature, or perhaps art. Now, misrepresenting the Absolute

in this way is not entirely erroneous, in that it does convey a certain aspect of the Absolute.

Furthermore, representations of this kind are indispensable to *Geist*'s process of coming to know

itself, and their importance lies precisely in their departure from the precision of philosophical

abstraction.[118] Nevertheless, such a construal will always remain incomplete.[119] Discovering that

a given religious conception is partial in this way, that there is an incongruence between

representation and represented forms the mechanism of religious development traced in the

lectures. This process finds its terminus in Christianity, about which Hegel writes:

> Es ist das die vollendete Religion, die Religion, die das Sein des Geistes für sich
> selbst ist, die Religion, in welcher sie selbst sich objektiv geworden ist,
> die *christliche.* In ihr ist unzertrennlich der allgemeine und der einzelne Geist, der
> unendliche und der endliche; ihre absolute Identität ist diese Religion und der Inhalt
> derselben.[120]

The superiority of the Christian religion lies in the fact that it is the most adequate representation

of *what Geist is*. This is because the content of the Christian religion is not worship of a

transcendent otherworldly being, but rather the human ethical community. But before turning

directly to Christianity, however, I have to say something about what exactly it is that Hegel

thinks a modern religion is supposed to present in the mode of *Vorstellung*.

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but express something about the world as a whole, that our desires can find satisfaction in the world: "Die göttliche Idee hat die Bedeutung, daß sie das absolute Subjekt, die *Wahrheit* des Universums der natürlichen und geistigen Welt, nicht bloß ein *abstrakt Anderes* ist. Es ist daher derselbe Stoff," H, XVI: 113.

[118] Fichte, in an unpublished aphorism, had said something like this too: "Es scheint allgemeines Bedürfniß des Menschen zu seyn, in seinem Gotte gewisse Eigenschaften zu suchen, die der erste Schritt zur Speculation ihm *absprechen* muß. Diese wird ihm Gott als ein unveränderliches, keiner Leidenschaft fähiges Wesen zeigen; und sein Herz heischt einen Gott, der sich erbitten lasse, der Mitleiden, der Freundschaft fühle. Diese zeigt ihn als ein Wesen, das mit ihm und mit jedem Endlichen gar keinen Berührungspunkt gemein habe; und jenes will einen Gott, dem es sich mittheilen, mit dem es sich gegenseitig modifiziren könne." F, 2.1:287.

[119] The clearest discussion of this point that I am aware of in Hegel appears in the lectures on aesthetics, in the discussion of the superiority of expressive capacity in philosophy as opposed to art and religion; see H, XIII: 143-144. See also Raymond Geuss's helpful elucidation in Raymond Geuss, *Morality, Culture, and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 92ff.

[120] H, XVII: 189. Hegel gives a lucid overview of the alienated alternative representations of divinity at XVII: 191-193.

On Hegel's view, the modern world distinguishes itself from all previous ages by recognizing that *Geist* legislates its own meaning, rather than finding it given in nature or receiving it as imposed by God. The great confusion of human history has been to project "divinity" onto any number of external, non-human entities, whether nature, art, or an invisible God. The contemporary standpoint of *Geist* has come to recognize that it cannot find the Absolute in a static location outside of itself and that humanity is the manifestation of the divine:

> Die Größe des Standpunkts der modernen Welt ist also diese Vertiefung des Subjekts in sich, daß das *Endliche* sich selbst als *Unendliches* weiß.[121]

With this insight, the task of Absolute Spirit—the self-representation of *Geist*—undergoes a fundamental shift. In Hegel's narrative, humans used to understand themselves (wrongly) to be finite beings confronted in some form or another by an Absolute that we understood to be other than us, and the aim of practices like religion was to represent whatever exactly it was that we took this Absolute to consist in. Since this is no longer the case and we now recognize *ourselves* as the Absolute, religion, art, and philosophy must now represent *us*, the ethical community of finite human beings, as the locus of the Absolute.[122] Hegel describes this new situation of religion as follows:

> Denn so steht dem Unendlichen ein Unendliches entgegen, und es setzt sich das Unendliche selbst so als ein Endliches, so daß das Subjekt seiner Unendlichkeit wegen gedrungen ist, diesen Gegensatz, der selbst zu seiner Unendlichkeit sich vertieft hat, aufzuheben.[123]

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[121] H, XVII: 207.

[122] Religion and art, that is, must disavow in their representation any claim to be a self-standing embodiment of the Absolute. John Walker's description of the task of modern art—which can be applied equally to modern religion—is very much to the point: "Hence the characteristic of the romantic art of Hegel's own time is not to embody a transcendence which is experienced as really present. It is to imagine aesthetically a transcendence which is known *not* to be adequately embodied in the form of its aesthetic representation," John Walker, "Art, Religion, and the Modernity of Hegel," in *Hegel and the Arts*, ed. Stephen Houlgate (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 271-295, here 275.

[123] H, XVII: 207-208.

Understanding this difficult passage hinges on not losing sight of the insight that Hegel thinks we have achieved, *the* insight about who we are: that the human community, *as human*, is the true self-legislating and self-producing Absolute. That is why Hegel refers in this passage to the overcoming of the opposition between the infinite and the finite. The infinite is *only* to be found in the finite world, not in some transcendent realm of the Absolute.[124] In the modern religion Hegel is calling for, the human community, aware of its infinite nature, presents itself with a *Vorstellung* of the infinite, but this *Vorstellung* of the infinite can therefore only be the representation of finite humanity.[125] In a word, the task of modern religion is not to speak of the divinity of God, but of the divinity of the human race, the only true site of divinity.

With this, we have arrived at the basis of Hegel's claim that Christianity is the "Absolute Religion." To make this more concrete, everything turns on the central doctrine of Christianity, Jesus as the divine man, in which it becomes clear that the Absolute can only become truly visible in the form of ethical human life. This might sound close to the formulations we have seen in von Balthasar, but Hegel's project could not be at a further remove from the idea of gaining access to the transcendent incomprehensible God through the mystery of divine love in the Son.[126] On Hegel's view, the Incarnation does not bring us into contact with a transcendent

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[124] This is why Hegel designates Christianity as the "offenbare Religion": the content of Christianity is a reflection on the nature of religious claims in general, such that with its emergence the essence of our religious mode of being becomes manifest: "Die absolute Religion ist erstens die offenbare Religion. Die Religion ist das Offenbare, ist manifestiert erst dann, wenn der *Begriff* der Religion *für sich* selbst ist; oder die Religion, der Begriff derselben ist sich selbst objektiv geworden, nicht in beschränkter, endlicher Objektivität, sondern so, daß sie nach ihrem Begriff sich objektiv ist," H, XVII: 188.

[125] Again, showing this not only becomes the task of religion, but also of art: "Indem dadurch das wirkliche Subjekt die Erscheinung Gottes ist, gewinnt die Kunst jetzt erst das höhere Recht, die menschliche Gestalt und Weise der Äußerlichkeit überhaupt zum Ausdruck des Absoluten zu verwenden, obschon die neue Aufgabe der Kunst nur darin bestehen kann, in dieser Gestalt nicht die Versenkung des Inneren in die äußere Leiblichkeit, sondern umgekehrt die Zurücknahme des Inneren in sich, das geistige Bewußtsein Gottes im Subjekt zur Anschauung zu bringen," H, XIII: 131.

[126] The most unambiguous remarks that I am aware of to this effect appear in Hegel's preface to Hermann Friedrich Wilhelm Hinrichs's *Die Religion im inneren Verhältnisse zur Wissenschaft* (1822), where he refers to the "Vorurteil, mit welchem das Philosophieren über den Gegenstand der Religion in unserer Zeit zu kämpfen hat, nämlich daß das Göttliche nicht *begriffen* werden könne, daß vielmehr sogar der Begriff und und das begreifende Erkennen Gott und

reality that is incomprehensible to finite human reason, but instead reveals that the true Absolute,

the only transcendence that can have any meaning to us, is located not in a transcendent being

defined by his difference from the world, but rather within the self-legislating, self-producing

projects of *Geist*. In lieu of a unique privilege resulting from a divine origin, Hegel explains the

superiority of Christianity in terms of its historical role in *Geist* coming to know itself.[127]

The essential point is that the central teachings of Christianity overcome the opposition

between transcendence and immanence allow us to see the union of the human and the divine.

Here is how Hegel describes what he takes to be the essence of Christian doctrine:

> …so ist die *Idee* des Geistes, die *Einheit der göttlichen und menschlichen Natur* zu
> sein. Aber die *göttliche* Natur ist selbst nur dies, der *absolute Geist* zu sein; also
> eben die *Einheit* der göttlichen und menschlichen Natur ist selbst der *absolute
> Geist*.[128]

Or, even more explicitly:

> Im Gegensatz hierzu kann man den Begriff der absoluten Religion so angeben, daß
> das, um was es zu tun ist, nicht dies Äußere sei, sondern die *Religion selbst,* d. h.
> die Einheit dieser Vorstellung, die wir Gott heißen, mit dem Subjekt.[129]

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die göttlichen Eigenschaften in das Gebiet der Endlichkeit herabsetze und eben damit vielmehr vernichte," und goes on to say: "Es ist die ganz eigentümliche Erscheinung dieser Zeit, auf der Spitze ihrer Bildung zu jener alten Vorstellung zurückgekehrt zu sein, daß Gott das Unmitteilende sei und seine Natur dem menschlichen Geiste nicht offenbare. Diese Behauptung von dem Neide Gottes muß innerhalb des Kreises der christlichen Religion umsomehr auffallen, als diese Religion nichts ist und sein will als die *Offenbarung* dessen, was Gott ist, und die christliche Gemeinde nichts sein soll als die Gemeinde, in die der Geist Gottes gesandt und in welcher derselbe—der eben, weil er Geist, nicht Sinnlichkeit und Gefühl, nicht ein Vorstellen von Sinnlichem, sondern Denken, Wissen, Erkennen ist und, weil er der göttliche, heilige Geist ist, nur Denken, Wissen und Erkennen von Gott ist—d ie Mitglieder in die Erkenntnis Gottes leitet. Was wäre die christliche Gemeinde noch ohne diese Erkenntnis? Was ist eine Theologie ohne Erkenntnis Gottes? Eben das, was eine Philosophie ohne dieselbe ist, ein tönend Erz und eine klingende Schelle!" H, XI: 64, 65.

[127] In another lucid formulation, John Walker puts it this way: "The point of a philosophy of history as a philosophy of Revelation is not to show—by some hybrid of philosophical argument belonging neither to history nor to religion — how the finite world of human history is connected to some transcendent teleology which might be supposed to lie behind it. It is to show that the infinite is in the finite, although it can never be reduced to the finite: that the infinite is embodied in the finite, and that the fact of such embodiment, far from being the product of philosophical thought, is the condition in experience which makes philosophy possible. The embodiment of truth in experience is what is meant by Incarnation," John Walker, "The Concept of Revelation and Hegel's Historical Realism," *Hegel-Studien* 24 (1989): 79-96, here 89.

[128] H, XVIII: 205.

[129] H, XVII: 190.

The idea expressed in these passages is that unity of the divine and human nature is the central conclusion of Christianity. The fundamental thought of revelation in its traditional Christian context, that the purpose of the humanity of the Son is to provide access to the transcendence of the invisible Father, is intentionally omitted from Hegel's definition as the confused projection of our own alienation. This is unmistakably clear in the second passage just cited, in his description of religion as "die Einheit *dieser Vorstellung, die wir Gott heißen*, mit dem Subjekt." He may as well have said that we now recognize as an expression of our own nature what we once mistakenly attributed to a divinity: a (our) representation that we call God. This is plainly the case in his analysis of Jesus in the Gospels. Here is his description of the narration of Jesus's life:

> Bei der Form dieses Aussprechens ist aber der Hauptakzent darauf gelegt, daß der, welcher dies sagt, zugleich der Mensch wesentlich ist, der Menschensohn es ist, der es ausspricht, in dem dieses Aussprechen, diese Betätigung des an und für sich Seienden, dies Wirken Gottes wesentlich ist als in einem Menschen, nicht als etwas Übermenschliches, als etwas, das in Gestalt einer *äußeren* Offenbarung kommt, daß diese *göttliche Gegenwart wesentlich identisch ist mit dem Menschlichen*.[130]

On Hegel's account, the entire message there lies in the fact that Jesus *is a human being*, and it is in his humanity, not his Godhood, that he is divine. This claim marks the culmination of Hegel's evaluation of Christianity, and it is not difficult to reassess its other doctrines from there. The categories of revelation and the Holy Trinity, for instance, should be understood as symbolic expressions of the fact that *Geist* is inherently intersubjective, it only exists as for another:

> Was offenbart Gott eben, als daß er dies Offenbaren seiner ist?...Was geoffenbart wird, ist dies, daß [Gott] für ein Anderes ist. Das ist die Bestimmung des Offenbarens.[131]

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[130] H, XVII: 285.
[131] H, XVII: 194.

The same is true of the doctrines of the Holy Spirit and the Church, which turn out to be

expressions of the claim we have been seeing all along, that the ethical community is the

dwelling place of God:

> …so ist Gott Geist, und zwar der Geist seiner Gemeinde, d. i. derer, die ihn verehren. Das ist die vollendete Religion, der sich objektiv gewordene Begriff. Hier ist es offenbar, was Gott ist; er ist nicht mehr ein Jenseits, ein Unbekanntes, denn er hat den Menschen kundgetan, was er ist, und nicht bloß in einer äußerlichen Geschichte, sondern im Bewußtsein. Wir haben also hier die Religion der Manifestation Gottes, indem Gott sich im endlichen Geiste weiß.[132]

In placing such plain emphasis on the divine quality of the human community, Christianity

presents us with a representation not of some God out there, but of the true nature of the divine

that we can recognize in the modern age. It is in this respect that Christianity is the culmination

of religious representation. What we are left with is an immanent world of finite human beings

and their collective undertakings, but Hegel's whole claim is that this conclusion is neither

deflationary nor a deprivation. The disappearance of the transcendent God does not mark the

retreat of the Absolute; it makes possible the recognition of its true form.[133]

<p align="center">***</p>

At this point, I can specify what I said earlier about Hegel's role in the theological

development that began with Kant. There I claimed that, although there were no further

theoretical advances to be made with respect to the logical critique of revelation after Kant and

Fichte, this achievement still faced the task of explaining why Christianity had exercised such a

powerful hold over European society, predicated as it was on a philosophically incoherent

concept. Hegel offered a solution to this problem, giving comprehensive accounts of how

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[132] H, XVII: 187.

[133] As Hegel puts it in his *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*, his philosophical position is not a rejection of Christianity, but rather the liberation of its true content from theological dogmatism: "Vielmehr ist es in neueren Zeiten so weit gekommen, daß die Philosophie sich des religiösen Inhalts gegen manche Art von Theologie anzunehmen hat," H, XII: 27.

religion contributes to our self-understanding generally; why this contribution is inclined to distort our understanding of ourselves; and why Christianity represents the final secularized expression of the insight that *Geist* has achieved. Hegel attempts not to criticize Christian theology head on, but to diagnose a confusion at the heart of Christianity's self-understanding, a standpoint which interprets the profoundly humanistic claims in the Bible in the mythical terms of external transcendence. This is to invert the message of Jesus: the Christian religion announces the divinity not of one man, but of humanity taken as a whole. This sweeping account, if successful, not only eviscerates the foundational concept of Christianity but also deprives it of any ground to stand on in the way of historical apologetics. That is why, with Hegel, the active engagement and rejection of divine revelation that we have traced here reaches a culmination far beyond the most radical critiques of the Enlightenment.

O wie weit und lang ist die Kunst und wie unendlich wird die Welt, wenn man sich nur einmal recht ans Endliche halten mag.[1]

Chapter 4: Goethe

Jacobi's Response

In the previous chapter, I put forward two claims: first, the religious positions developed by Kant, Fichte, and Hegel are intimately bound to a sustained rejection of the notion of divine revelation, and second, such a rejection follows directly from the guiding Idealist notion of an autonomous, self-legislating reason. This coupling of philosophical idealism and the restriction of theological possibilities immediately evokes the name of Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, who emerged as one of the most vocal critics of German Idealism in the period from 1785 to 1800. The earliest formulation of his criticism appeared in the 1785 work *Über die Lehre des Spinoza in Briefen an den Herrn Moses Mendelssohn*, in which he outlined what he regarded as the catastrophic implications of any sort of rationalist philosophical position. Although his conclusions were meant to represent the consistent development of all philosophical programs in the most general sense, Jacobi believed that Spinoza was the first philosopher to articulate and embrace the deterministic worldview toward which the philosophical enterprise naturally inclines.[2] In his own day, Jacobi saw the philosophy of Kant—and, later, Fichte—as a species of crypto-Spinozism, and he watched with dismay as the Kantian project became increasingly decisive for the German philosophical agenda in the last decades of the 18th century.[3]

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[1] Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Italienische Reise*, "Zweiter römischer Auftenthalt," letter from 22 September 1787, FA I 15/1: 428.

[2] Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, *Werke*, ed. Klaus Hammacher and Walter Jaeschke (Hamburg: Meiner, 1998–), vol. 1.1, 28. For general background on the so-called Spinozastreit, see Frederick C. Beiser, *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1987), 44-91.

[3] The early Schelling quickly became another target of these accusations of Spinozism; on Jacobi's assessment of these thinkers, see Paul Franks, "All or Nothing: Systematicity and Nihilism in Jacobi, Reinhold, and Maimon," in *The Cambridge Companion to German Idealism*, ed. Karl Ameriks (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 95-116.

Jacobi's chief concern was to demonstrate the inadequacy of philosophy to respond to the deepest aspirations of human life. On his view, any attempt to give a comprehensive philosophical account of the world would inevitably issue in the unbearable existential condition that he would later christen "nihilism." His fear, in effect, was that conceding the kind of autonomy to reason that philosophy presumes would eradicate any meaningful possibility of human freedom. In support of this assertion, Jacobi attempted to demonstrate that the most distinctively human aspects of our existence—such as freedom—are inaccessible to philosophical reflection: they are a matter of religious faith, a domain which, he argues, is intractable to any kind of rational account. Therefore, any purely philosophical account of the world will have little choice but to reject them as illusory.

This raises an obvious question: how can we argue for the supposed truth of his religious alternative if it is not liable to rational explanation? For Jacobi, the answer is simple: we cannot. No positive reason can be given in favor of embracing religious faith; the best that can be done is to call attention to the negative consequences of rationalism. And if the philosopher decides that reason's claims are simply too strong to abandon even in light of these consequences, Jacobi can only respond: "Wer dieses annehmen kann, dessen Meynung weiß ich nicht zu überlegen."[4] Faith cannot be explained or motivated, it can only be achieved through an extra-rational act of will captured in his famous assertion: "Ich helfe mir durch einen Salto mortale aus der Sache."[5] Naturally, this characterization of faith puts Jacobi in an awkward position when it comes to persuading a philosophical interlocutor to renounce her rational convictions. If it is correct to say "Jeder Weg der Demonstration geht in den Fatalismus aus," then any attempt to refute the

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[4] Jacobi, *Werke*, 1.1, 21.
[5] Jacobi, *Werke*, 1.1, 20.

philosopher's objections would embroil Jacobi in the same rational game from which he wants to extricate us.[6]

Of course, none of this would come as a surprise to Jacobi. Indeed, he prefaces his one-sided reconstruction of Spinoza's thought with a notorious anecdote of just such a failed conversation with Lessing. The infamous report reconstructs the most extreme version of the kind of communicative failure that such an account of faith is subject to. According to the version of the exchange reported in the *Briefe*, Lessing fully accepts Jacobi's assessment of the philosophical view of the world as well as its fatalistic consequences, but nevertheless insists that this admission does not by itself get us any closer to the religious conclusions Jacobi is in the business of promoting. Some further motivation is needed, and Lessing implies—rightly, I think—that the austerity of Jacobi's position has deprived him of any means to provide it:

> Gut, sehr gut! Ich kann das alles auch gebrauchen; aber ich kann nicht dasselbe damit machen. Ueberhaupt gefällt Ihr Salto mortale mir nicht übel; und ich begreife, wie ein Mann von Kopf auf diese Art Kopf-unter machen kann, um von der Stelle zu kommen. Nehmen Sie mich mit, wenn es angeht…Auch dazu gehörte schon ein Sprung, den ich meinen alten Beinen und meinem schweren Kopf nicht mehr zumuthen darf.[7]

Jacobi's decision to deny any kind of rationality to religion has simultaneously made it impossible to say anything about the religious sphere that he wants to defend. On Jacobi's view, there is nothing internal to philosophy that would motivate raising the question of faith, which entails that the philosopher has no reason to suspect that reason is anything other than an autonomous domain with no externality. This culminates in the extremely paradoxical situation in which Jacobi and Lessing part ways. Although their worldviews diverge dramatically, they

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[6] Jacobi, *Werke*, 1.1, 123.
[7] Jacobi, *Werke*, 1.1, 30.

find themselves to be in complete philosophical agreement with one another: "Wir waren in unserer Philosophie sehr wenig auseinander, und nur im Glauben unterschieden."[8]

Given his disagreements with the central Idealist tenet of Kant and his successors, there is considerable reason to consider Jacobi as the most significant philosophical-religious critic of German Idealism, as many studies of this period have argued.[9] Historically speaking, this judgement is undoubtedly true, given Jacobi's extensive influence on popular opinion in nearly every major philosophical controversy during his lifetime. It has also been frequently pointed out, however, that Jacobi's critique of Spinozism never substantively confronts the core concerns of Kant and his successors. As I've argued in the previous chapter, most of the arguments developed in the spirit of critical philosophy were negative ones and appealed to the incoherence of positing a non-rational sphere intractable to reason. Jacobi is simply begging the question when he says that religion is outside the sphere of human rationality. Whether such a conception is coherent in the first place is the central concern of German Idealism. This question remains largely unasked in Jacobi's thought, despite the fact that his critics regularly objected along these lines.[10]

I want to suggest in this chapter that it was not Jacobi but Johann Wolfgang von Goethe who offered the most profound critical engagement with the core philosophical itinerary of German Idealism, along with its theological implications. Like Jacobi, Goethe rejected the philosophical project of Idealism, according to which thought can determine exhaustively the conditions of its own possibility. In Goethe's thought, however, this conclusion does not aim to secure a sphere of religious experience that lies entirely outside of rational explanation. Instead,

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[8] Jacobi, *Werke*, 1.1, 36.

[9] See, for instance, Terry Pinkard, *German Philosophy, 1760-1860: The Legacy of Idealism* (London and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 90-96.

[10] See, for instance, Kant's remarks in "Was heißt es: Sich im Denken orientieren?" AA, 8:143-144.

Goethe's critique of Idealism emerges as a theorization of rational finitude. Jacobi believed that rational lucidity was coextensive with philosophical rationalism. Any domain of human experience not subject to conceptual demonstration could only be thought of as impenetrable to reason, and attempting to say anything on such a subject would eventually lead to nihilism. Goethe's project, on the other hand, was one of rejecting Idealism without rejecting the intelligibility of those domains which elude expression in a concept.

It will be the work of the coming pages to explain what I mean by this claim, but the most significant contrast between Goethe's notion of rational finitude and Jacobi's *salto mortale* is to be found in clear passages like this one, which Goethe composed from his apartment in Rome on the first day of December in 1787:

> Soviel versichre ich dir: ich bin über die wichtigsten Punkte mehr als gewiß, und obgleich die Erkenntnis sich ins Unendliche erweitern könnte, so hab' ich doch *vom Endlich-Unendlichen* einen *sichern* ja *klaren* und *mitteilbaren Begriff*. Ich habe noch die wunderlichsten Sachen vor und halte mein Erkenntnisvermögen zurück, daß nur meine tätige Kraft einigermaßen fortkomme. Denn da sind herrliche Sachen und *so begreiflich wie die Flachhand, wenn man sie nur gefaßt hat*.[11]

I am going to suggest that the relationship between the finite and the infinite referred to in this letter is an expression of Goethe's distinctive notion of human finitude, but the important point for the moment is the profound disagreement with Jacobi implied in this passage. The epistemological presupposition of the achievement that Goethe describes is that it is possible to capture "das Endlich-Unendliche" in a determinate, meaningful concept ("ein sicherer klarer Begriff") that can be adequately expressed to others ("mitteilbar"). The claim that the relationship between the infinite and the finite is intelligible—whatever the specifics of this configuration might turn out to be—marks a fundamental departure from Jacobi's elementary conviction that it is not.

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[11] FA I 15/1: 476; emphasis added.

In what follows, I will examine two phases of Goethe's conception of the relation between the human and the divine that are both intimately bound to aspects of human finitude. The first phase emerges in his early poetic works and centers on the anthropological and ethical dimensions of our finite condition. These concerns find exemplary expression in the 1783 poem "Das Göttliche" and the 1789 drama *Iphigenie auf Tauris*, to which the next two sections will be devoted. The second phase in this aspect of Goethe's thought has its roots in his early engagement with Spinoza and finds full articulation in the mature scientific writings. There— above all the opening sections of the *Farbenlehre*—thematize our capacity for knowledge of the divine, and it is here that the epistemological issues with which the previous chapters have been concerned will reemerge in a distinctly Goethean form. These texts develop a critique of German Idealism that is not based on a rejection of reason, but on a reconceptualization of the categories that structure human rationality.

Das Göttliche

The present section will consider Goethe's poem from 1783, which I reproduce here in full:

Das Göttliche

Edel sei der Mensch,
Hülfreich und gut!
Denn das allein
Unterscheidet ihn
Von allen Wesen,
Die wir kennen.

Heil den unbekannten
Höhern Wesen,
Die wir ahnden!
Sein Beispiel lehr' uns
Jene glauben.

Denn unfühlend
Ist die Natur:
Es leuchtet die Sonne
Über Bös' und Gute,
Und dem Verbrecher
Glänzen wie dem Besten
Der Mond und die Sterne.

   Wind und Ströme,
Donner und Hagel
Rauschen ihren Weg,
Und ergreifen,
Vorüber eilend,
Einen um den andern.

Auch so das Glück
Tappt unter die Menge,
Faßt bald des Knaben
Lockige Unschuld,
Bald auch den kahlen
Schuldigen Scheitel.

Nach ewigen, ehrnen,
Großen Gesetzen,
Müssen wir alle
Unseres Daseins
Kreise vollenden.

Nur allein der Mensch
Vermag das Unmögliche:
Er unterscheidet,
Wählet und richtet;
Er kann dem Augenblick
Dauer verleihen.

Er allein darf
Dem Guten lohnen,
Den Bösen strafen;
Heilen und retten
Alles Irrende, Schweifende
Nützlich verbinden.

Und wir verehren
Die Unsterblichen,
Als wären sie Menschen,

Täten im Großen,
Was der Beste im Kleinen
Tut oder möchte.

Der edle Mensch
Sei hülfreich und gut!
Unermüdet schaff' er
Das Nützliche, Rechte,
Sei uns ein Vorbild
Jener geahndeten Wesen![12]

The first and most obvious issue this poem raises is that of the relationship between the poem's

title and its content. While the former announces that the poem is supposed to say something

about "Das Göttliche," the verses that follow make no mention of "Gott" or "Götter." While the

poem does mention "Höher[e] Wesen" and "die Unsterblichen," it is unclear what exactly these

referents might stand for, as we shall see shortly. Instead of a reflection on God or the gods, the

poem focuses entirely on the figure of "der Mensch." The suggestion here is that understanding

the divine is intimately linked with understanding some facet of human nature, and to have the

wrong concept of the human is to have the wrong concept of divinity. This connection appears

most explicitly in two sections of the poem: the exhortation "Sein [des Menschen] Beispiel lehr'

uns/Jene [die höheren Wesen] glauben!" and the final lines, in which "der edle Mensch" is urged

to be "ein Vorbild/Jener geahndeten Wesen!"

Following its initial hortatory exclamation, the poem proceeds to outline a tripartite

taxonomy of beings:

Denn das allein
Unterscheidet ihn [den Menschen]
Von allen Wesen,
Die wir kennen.

Heil den unbekannten
Höhern Wesen,
Die wir ahnden!

[12] FA I 1: 333-334.

At the center of this division stands "der Mensch," who is separated from "allen Wesen,/Die wir kennen" by possessing a nature that is capable of becoming "Edel…/Hülfreich und gut." The poem then introduces a new category of beings, distinguished from those in the previous stanza through their unknowability: "[die] unbekannten/Höhern Wesen,/Die wir ahnden!" This is not to say that these higher beings are completely inaccessible to us, however, and the poem notes two instances in which they are available to us in experience. The first is the mode of *Ahndung*, a species of non-conceptual access to the divine. The second is through the exemplary ("Beispiel") character of the noble human being, who can provide a determinate content to our notion of God by serving as a model of the divine nature. I will return to the function of *Ahndung* in a moment, but first I want to focus on the poem's conception of humanity.

The poem's opening lines introduce the terms "edel," "hülfreich," and "gut" as the distinguishing traits of human nature, the defining qualities of properly human life. These are strikingly general concepts to invoke as the specific difference separating humans from other kinds of beings, but we can gain some orientation by noting that each term designates a recognizable ethical concept. To be helpful is to exist in a way that is ordered toward promoting the good of one's fellow human beings; it is to integrate into one's life a distinctly moral conception of the good that is predicated on transcending one's own self-interested desires. Nobility and goodness are terms with an equally robust set of ethical connotations. These concepts occupied a central position in the ethical thought of classical Greece, where they came to be so intimately connected as to merit their own term: καλοκἀγαθία.[13] Taken as a trio, these terms clearly indicate that the distinguishing feature of human existence has something to do

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[13] See the analysis in Werner Jaeger, *Paideia. Die Formung des griechischen Menschen* (Berlin and Leipzig: 1934–1947), vol. 1, 23–37.

with a capacity for ethical action. And yet, even if it is clear that the poem's opening introduces an ethical agenda of some sort, it does not provide us with any determinate content beyond the level of association. Taken in isolation, the terms "noble," "helpful," and "good" are far too general to derive any particular instance of human behavior, or even to provide a clue about how and why they these particular concepts should belong together.[14] They remain fundamentally ambiguous with respect to the specific ideal of human life that they are meant to represent.

The relationship between these attributes and the subject they are supposed to characterize is further complicated by the fact that the opening utterance introduces them by way of exhortation, rather than description: "Edel *sei* der Mensch,/Hülfreich und gut!" I am going to claim that the exhortative force of this construction is essential to the poem's conception of the relationship between the human and the divine, but first some remarks on terminology are in order. With respect to morphology, the form "sei" belongs to the series typically designated in grammars of German as *Konjunktiv I.* This morphological category should not be confused with the modal use of *Konjunktiv I.* As a mood, *Konjunktiv I* is employed in indirect speech to report statements or claims without taking a stance on their truth. Because speaker at the beginning of "Das Göttliche" is clearly not using the form "sei" to report the utterance of another, the form "sei" in the poem does not correspond modally to this use of *Konunktiv I.* Instead, the verb is conjugated in what linguists sometimes call the jussive mood.[15] The jussive possesses an

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[14] Nietzsche, of course, devotes much of the opening treaty of *Zur Genealogie der Moral* to the ambiguous relation between these three concepts. There, the guiding thought is that a Judeo-Christian notion of goodness predicated on moral altruism has surreptitiously superseded the Greek identification of goodness with nobility of character. Nietzsche's point is that whether we conceive of "the good" in a way that opposes it to "the bad" or in a way that opposes it to "the evil" is an interpretive decision with massive ethical implications—and the poem does not provide us with the context to make such a crucial decision. That is why I am emphasizing the ambiguity of the opening terms, despite their obvious ethical provenance. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Zur Genealogie der Moral* in *Sämmtliche Werke. Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Bänden*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, 2nd ed. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1988), vol. 5, 257–289.

[15] I have chosen "jussive" to introduce this syntax in order a) to emphasize its distinction from second-person imperative forms, while b) retaining the injunctive force that this structure conveys, both qualities that are essential

exhortative force analogous to the imperative mood, but it is conjugated in the third person. This distinguishes it—in most grammars—from the imperative in the strict sense, which is taken to apply only to a second-person command.[16] This terminological distinction can be misleading, however, as the jussive can also function as a command directed to an addressee. Compare the following two statements, the first in the imperative, the second in the jussive, which are nevertheless identical in meaning:

1) *Melden* Sie sich bei mir, wenn Sie noch keinen Termin haben.

2) Wer noch keinen Termin hat, *melde* sich bei mir.

Despite the fact that the verb in 2) is not conjugated in the second-person form that is used more frequently for direct address, it still contains the two elements that characterize a command: the expression of a wish and the desire that the addressee bring the wish to fulfillment. It is because these two qualities are present in both examples that sentence 2) has the same meaning as sentence 1), despite the differences in mood and person and of the verb.

I have given so much attention to the imperatival quality of the jussive mood because it is essential to my reading of the poem that the opening syntax is not confused with yet another mood that is morphologically identical to the jussive. In addition to reporting indirect speech and

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to the verb's function in the poem. I say that this designation is used "sometimes" because how to label an exhortation in the third person is an issue of significant controversy among linguists. The most recent Duden grammar does not find it necessary to find a distinct category for it at all, describing this syntax as an "Aufforderung" within the general "Funktionsbereich" of *Konjunktiv I*; see *Duden. Grammatik der deutschen Gegenwartssprache*, ed. Peter Eisenberg et al., 6th ed. (Mannheim and Leipzig: Dudenverlag, 1998), 158. On the other hand, Greek and Latin grammars regularly speak of third-person imperatives, whereas Quirk describes the English equivalent as the "optative subjunctive"; see F. R. Palmer, *Mood and Modality*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 137; and Randolph Quirk et al., *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* (London and New York: Longman, 1985), 839. Other classifications of this syntax include hortatory, cohortative, and exhortative; for an overview of the terminological discrepancies, see the discussion in Nina Dobrushina, "What Is the Jussive for? A Study of Third Person Commands in Six Caucasian Languages," *Linguistics* 50, no. 1 (2012): 1–25, especially pp. 1–3.

[16] This distinction is sometimes dropped entirely, however, and the term imperative is taken to include exhortations in the third person; see, for example, p. 63 of Karin Donhauser, "Verbaler Modus oder Satztyp? Zur grammatischen Einordnung des deutschen Imperativs," in *Satzmodus zwischen Grammatik und Pragmatik*, ed. Jörg Meibauer (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1987), 57–74.

formulating exhortations, *Konjunktiv I* can also be employed in the third person to express

wishes which are not accompanied by an appeal to the addressee, as in the following example:

      3) Es *gebe* Frieden auf der ganzen Erde.

Sentence 3) expresses a wish, but, unlike sentence 2), it does so without enjoining the addressee

to undertake an action related to the utterance. When its function is solely to express a wish, this

verb form is characterized—again, sometimes—as the optative mood. But it is not the optative

that we encounter at the beginning of "Das Göttliche." For the opening lines express more than a

mere wish. The poem not only describes a desire for how a human should act but expresses this

desire to a human audience. Because the addressee and the subject of the wish are identical, the

utterance inevitably carries an exhortative force, enjoining the addressee to respond to the desire

in which she is implicated. In this sense, the opening line functions as an exhortation *to*

humanity, not a desire *about* humanity. Although "Edel sei der Mensch!" is not an imperative in

the strict sense of an order issued in the second person, it does exhibit a binding character: the

content of the utterance is inseparable from a demand it places on the addressee. In the coming

pages, when I use terms like injunctive, exhortative, imperatival, or commanding, it is to this

dimension of their syntax that I am referring.

      Turning back to the poem, I want to draw attention to two syntactic features that

distinguish a jussive utterance from its equivalent in the indicative mood. The first has to do with

its temporal structure.[17] What necessitates an injunction is a perceived discrepancy between how

things are and how they are desired to be. A speech act with imperatival force responds to this

perception by urging the addressee to eliminate the discrepancy in question. The demanded

action can only take place at some future point subsequent to the utterance. Exhortations, that is,

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[17] Here I am drawing on Eric Gans, "Naissance du moi lyrique: Du féminin au masculin," *Poétique* 46 (1981): 129–139.

express a trajectory bridging the present and a wished-for future state. [18] Thus, the opening lines do not contain a description of what humanity *is* but express a desire for what humanity should *become*, establishing a temporal point of reference for the statement that occurs at some point in the future. The second feature is closely bound to the first and has to do with the prescriptive character of the imperatival utterance. The temporality of the jussive mood does not lie in descriptively charting a mechanistic transition from one state to another, but in the fact that it makes a particular claim about how the future should be. The opening injunction "Edel sei der Mensch" does not describe what humanity *will* become, but what it *ought* to become. Now, it is essential to the distinction between descriptive and normative formulations that the latter refers to a situation that is only potential at the moment of the utterance: such an expression enjoins its addressee to undertake the actions necessary to ensure that a possible state of affairs is realized. It is constitutive of such an expression that it is oriented toward the future, no matter what the present state of "Der Mensch" is. From the standpoint of utterance, the human being only possesses these qualities in the mode of potentiality. And the prospect that a wish might not come to fruition is intimately bound up with the communicative situation in which an exhortation, plea, or command is uttered. It is this possibility that elicits admonition in the first place.

This leads me to another distinctive feature of the opening sentence: imperatival utterances are a distinctly human phenomenon. As a speech act, an exhortation presumes that it is addressed to an individual who can take responsibility for what is enjoined. An animal might be trained to respond in a certain way to the voice of its owner, but such conditioning is limited to establishing habitual associations with external stimuli. When an animal is given a command,

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[18] In Gans's fomulation: "L'impératif n'est en fait jamais autre chose qu'un ostentatif à l'envers, où la présence imaginaire précède celle de la réalité," "Naissance," 137.

it is not faced with fulfilling or falling short of a norm: a dog is not responsible for failing to

come when called in the same sense as a human is responsible for failing to keep a promise.[19]

That responsiveness to norms distinguishes human behavior holds, of course, for many spheres

beyond the specific communicative situation that gives rise to a command. More generally,

specifically human activity takes place when individuals establish, reflect on, or respond to

norms.[20] Later on, the poem explicitly thematizes this dimension of human action. In the seventh

stanza, we read:

Nur allein der Mensch
Vermag das Unmögliche:
Er *unterscheidet*,
Wählet und *richtet*;

And the following stanza opens:

Er allein darf
Dem Guten lohnen,
Den Bösen strafen;

Humans perpetually draw distinctions in their experience that reflect the meaning with which

they have endowed the world, distinguishing relevance from insignificance, utility from harm,

and uprightness from injustice. Each of these acts presumes an implicit evaluative standard

which serves as a basis for division. Unlike the instinct-driven behavior of animals, human

actions involve (frequently unarticulated) judgments of significance. Even our most elementary

responses to danger are not matters of blind reaction but imply norms that we could in principle

make explicit and account for.[21]

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[19] On this distinction, see H. P. Grice, "Meaning," *The Philosophical Review* 66, no. 3 (1957): 377–388, especially 384–386.

[20] See the extensive treatment of these topics in Robert Brandom, *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

[21] On the philosophical assumptions behind this thought, see Matthew Boyle, "Essentially Rational Animals," in *Rethinking Epistemology*, ed. Günter Abel and James Conant (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2012), vol. 2, 395–427.

Now, there is a strong tendency in the secondary literature to assume that the lines I have just cited from stanzas seven and eight represent the core of the poem. On this view, the poem culminates when these stanzas designate morality as both the essentially human act as well as the link between the human and the divine.[22] I will turn to the role of the divine in the poem shortly, but for the moment I want to draw attention to the fact that the poem's hortatory opening begins to delineate the specifically human long before these later stanzas in a way that is distinct from morality in the strict sense, and it does so in a way that turns on the intelligibility of the exhortative form. Even before the specifically moral character of human life comes into focus, a human being is, in the first instance, a creature with the capacity to receive and respond to an injunction.[23]

In the poem, of course, this general capacity is bound to a specific injunction, the exhortation to transcend all knowable beings by becoming noble, helpful, and good. The fact that humanity only potentially embodies these qualities implies a second distinguishing feature of the human being: it is the kind of being that can *fail to become what it is meant to be*. This is the thought expressed in the second part of the first stanza:

Denn das allein
Unterscheidet ihn
Von allen Wesen
Die wir kennen.

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[22] Here is an exemplary formulation of this view: "ethisches Handeln [läßt] des Menschen Sinn überhaupt erst hervortreten und erkennen […], ja ihn letztlich erst konstituert," Karl Otto Conrady, "Zwei Gedichte Goethes kritisch gelesen," in *Literatur und Germanistik als Herausforderung. Skizzen und Stellungnahmen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974), 154–185, here 179.

[23] This is to say that I am diverging from the school of interpretation that sees in the poem the identification of the divine with morality; for a recent example of this reading of the poem, see pp. 166–170 of Horst Lange, "Isaac, Iphigeneia, Christ: Human Sacrifice and the Semiotics of Divine Intentions in Goethe," *Publications of the English Goethe Society* 78, no. 3 (2009): 166–188.

"Noble," "helpful," and "good" characterize an ideal of human flourishing, but human beings are distinct from all other known beings in that their capacity for such flourishing depends on their own initiative. Humans can become good; they can also become evil. Both are possibilities of a human life. This potentiality is at the core of human existence: *whether* a human being will become "edel, hülfreich und gut" is not given along with the mere fact of being human. But what would count as a human existence that has succeeded in this endeavor? As I have already noted, while the opening concepts are not empty, they are nevertheless too general to provide any immediate answer to this question. *And this ambiguity, I want to claim, is exactly the point*. Let me explain.

Although these terms are too indeterminate to function as informative predicates when taken in isolation, they contribute meaning in the poem in two respects. The first is that, even in isolation, each evokes a rich network of associations that span the semantic domains of ethics ("noble"), sociality ("helpful"), and morality ("good"). Although none of these adjectives is sufficiently specific to delimit human beings as a species with any degree of precision, their associative networks do intimate what such a specification might consist in. (Pettiness, for instance, would seem to be excluded as an interpretation of nobility; altruism is a plausible—but not definitive—understanding of helpfulness.) The second respect once again relates to the jussive syntax of first lines: we cannot remain indifferent to the meaning that we attribute to these expressions. We can only fulfill the poem's opening imperative—and thereby our human vocation—on the condition that we articulate a satisfying understanding of what these qualities consist in.

The combination of these two features causes the opening exhortation to function in a manner that resembles the psycho-linguistic phenomenon that Jonathan Lear has characterized as

the imposition of an enigmatic signifier.[24] Such an utterance combines opacity with an irresistible force of fascination in a way that simultaneously elicits and rebuffs interpretive resolution. Phenomenologically, the enigmatic signifier lays claim to the listener with the utmost exigency, while resisting all attempts to solve its riddle.[25] (Its paradigmatic expression is the oracular pronunciation.) Such an utterance becomes inextricably entwined with all of our attempts to find and sustain meaning, operating as a kind of imperatival voice in the background of our endeavors and decisions. We could say it becomes a constitutive feature of the subject's horizon of meaning. Interpreting the riddle of the utterance comes to be identified with the guiding question behind our life decisions, and yet the enigma refuses to submit to any formulaic solution. All proposed interpretations are provisional, and every seemingly stable understanding is relentlessly subjected to skeptical reevaluation. Of course, at issue in the poem is not a psychoanalytic case study of an individual, but an interpretation of human nature, and the concepts with which the poem begins are deployed to convey an essential aspect of human life. This aspect could be pictured in the following way.

A human being is born into a nebulous composite existence. The heterogeneous spheres that lay claim on her exhibit no evident unity. Yet as she moves from one task to another, she cannot help but reflect on how they relate to each other, how the disparate domains of her existence could be integrated into a higher order of meaning. We could say that her existence is intertwined with ethical considerations, or, in the terms of the poem, that she cannot articulate a

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[24] See Jonathan Lear, *Happiness, Death, and the Remainder of Life* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2000), 20–25.

[25] Lear's theory also sheds light on the opening's unusual use of the third-person imperative, which results in a normative constraint that is *for,* but not *addressed to* "der Mensch." The issue is once again that of ambiguity in the injunction that I am confronted with, an ambiguity that I must seek to resolve without being able to do so permanently. See the analysis of the role of the third person in the enigmatic utterance "This boy will come to nothing," in Jonathan Lear, *Freud* (New York and London: Routledge, 2005), 96–104.

conception of herself apart from the injunction to become "edel, hülfreich und gut." She

recognizes the grave importance that these words hold for her, but she grasps what they signify

only vaguely. Her existence becomes bound up with understanding what they mean.[26] She

occasionally believes she has unraveled their mystery, but eventually she sees that their riddle

will never be fully resolved. Yet even when she comes to recognize the ineliminable ambiguity

bound up with these terms, their need for interpretation loses none of its urgency. Eventually, she

may come to recognize that "edel, hülfreich, und gut" do not stand for specific achievable states,

but form the horizon of possibility in which a given ethical understanding can become available.

There is no final standpoint that allows the meaning of these terms to become transparent. They

function as an oracle that sets the drama into motion and whose correct interpretation forms the

entire concern of the character's action, but whose true meaning remains unavailable as long as

the play continues. Such, in essence, is the logic of distinctly human meaning: an interplay of

confusion, anxiety, interpretation, reinterpretation, revision, reversal, and commitment.[27]

 The conception of human nature that emerges in the first stanza of "Das Göttliche" is one

that is inherently undetermined and variable. Humans must define and sustain their own values

and norms, which will always remain contingent and provisional. What counts as being human

can always be called into question and revised. If, then, to be human is to have the capacity to

receive this injunction, then the distinctive activity of human life is to engage in the endless

interpretive process it calls for. It is only of this distinctively human process of continuous self-

interpretation that we can say: "Das allein/Unterscheidet Ihn/Von allen Wesen die wir kennen."

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[26] Cf. Heidegger's commentary on the categorical imperative as an interpretation of human existence that he describes as the "ontologische Verfassung des Menschen"; Martin Heidegger, *Die Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1975), 194–199.

[27] See Goethe's remark to Eckermann of 11 June 1825: "Der Mensch ist nicht geboren, die Probleme der Welt zu lösen, wohl aber zu suchen, wo das Problem angeht und sich sodann in der Grenze des Begreiflichen zu halten. Die Handlungen des Universums zu messen, reichen seine Fähigkeiten nicht hin, und in das Weltall Vernunft bringen zu wollen, ist bei seinem kleinen Standpunkt ein sehr vergebliches Bestreben," FA II 12: 163.

The conception of human nature that emerges in the opening stanza leads directly to the heart of the most complicated question raised by the poem: how does this meditation on "der Mensch" tell us something about "Das Göttliche"? The answer, I want to suggest, lies in the transition between the first and second stanzas, from the domain of "allen Wesen die wir *kennen*" to that of "den *unbekannten*…Wesen die wir *ahnden*." This progression relates directly to the notion of the human that we have observed in the opening stanza. We do not understand human nature in the same way as we understand the nature of inanimate objects, tools, plants, or sentient beings, and in this sense, the human being is unknowable, at least in the way other beings are knowable. Importantly, and this returns us to the discussion of finitude in Section Two of this chapter, this does not imply that we have no knowledge of what a human is. We do have knowledge of the human, and this negative characterization is meant to describe the form that this knowledge has: an endless hermeneutic activity that excludes the possibility of final conceptual articulation. Nor does this process occur within a vacuum: the human project of self-understanding presumes an ethical telos, a projection that provides the framework within which the interpretation of our existence finds its orientation. This is just to say, however, that our knowledge of human nature is partly constituted by a moment of *Ahndung*.

Herein lies the point of contact between humanity and the divine: if the first stanza turns on a contrast between all beings that we know and one for whom our knowledge is mediated by a form of anticipatory projection, the second stanza develops this division further with the introduction of the higher beings. While these beings may be unknown, we nevertheless have some access to them in the mode of *Ahndung*. This term marks a point of contact between the human and the divine in the poem, and it does so by invoking a distinctive temporal structure. When I undergo a moment of *Ahndung*, I experience an unknown or uncertain situation through

the lens of an anticipatory awareness that creates new meaning in my present experience. the significance that I experience in the present—what distinguishes *Ahndung* from mere unknowing, or conscious prediction—derives, first, from the significance that I expect will emerge at some future moment in time. *Ahndung* is the experience that something *is* meaningful now because it *will become* meaningful in the future.[28] This leads me to the second aspect of meaning in the experience of *Ahndung*: in such a moment, I anticipate a coming disclosure. And in such anticipation, I also become aware that there is something undisclosed in the present. I not only recognize that something is hidden now, but I recognize this hiddenness itself. This recognition becomes possible through anticipation of its approaching disclosure.

Such temporality eludes conceptual expression and forms the foundation of Goethe's appropriation of the Christian doctrine that human nature reflects the divine. Our knowledge of both human nature and the divine can only be grasped non-discursively: in poetically deploying the imperative mood, for instance. Much later in his life, Goethe would include an aphorism in *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre* that describes such insight as an instance of revelation:

> Alles was wir Erfinden, Entdecken im höheren Sinne nennen, ist die bedeutende Ausübung, Betätigung eines originalen Wahrheitsgefühles, das, im stillen längst ausgebildet, unversehens mit Blitzesschnelle zu einer fruchtbaren Erkenntnis führt. Es ist eine aus dem Innern am Äußern sich entwickelnde Offenbarung, die den Menschen seine Gottähnlichkeit vorahnen läßt. Es ist eine Synthese von Welt und Geist, welche von der ewigen Harmonie des Daseins die seligste Versicherung gibt.[29]

Humanity's "Gottähnlichkeit" is only recognizable in the mode of *Vorahnung*, and such recognition only occurs in a moment of disclosure that stands at the end of a hidden development. The "ewige Harmonie des Daseins," the accord between the human and the divine,

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[28] A cursory overview of its most direct synonyms confirms that *Ahndung* is inherently bound up with a future-oriented temporality: *Vorgefühl*, *Befürchtung*, and *Besorgnis*, not to mention the pleonastic *Vorahnung*.
[29] FA I 10: 576.

is not experienced as knowledge or certainty, but as the intuitive grasp of a disclosure that is constitutively in the future, beyond the present moment.

How does all of this get us to the mediating role that the poem assigns to humanity? The idea that our conception of the divine is bound to or even determined by our conception of humanity appears in three stanzas, two of which exhibit the same jussive syntax as the poem's opening:

Sein [des Menschen] Beispiel lehr' uns
Jene Glauben.

Der edle Mensch[…]
Sei uns ein Vorbild
Jener geahndeten Wesen!

The most significant formulation from an interpretive standpoint, however, occurs in the poem's penultimate stanza:

Und wir verehren
Die Unsterblichen,
Als wären sie Menschen,
Täten im Großen,
Was der Beste im Kleinen
Tut oder möchte.

Unlike the other formulations, the governing verb here ("verehren") appears in the indicative mood, syntactically signaling that the stanza is an assertion describing how things are, not how they could or should be. In this instance, what is asserted is the following anthropological claim: we regulate our relation to the divine by representing the gods as if they were quantitatively intensified versions of human beings. (The fact that the poem substitutes the "the immortals" for the more general "higher beings" implies that the mere act of trying to describe the situation involves an anthropomorphizing of the divine in which the it is conceived as the simple negation of a worldly phenomenon.)

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This implies that our conception of the divine varies as our notion of humanity changes. As Emil Staiger puts it, "Das Beispiel des Menschen kann uns Götter oder Dämonen glauben lehren. Es soll uns lehren, an Götter zu glauben. Denn je nachdem wir glauben, werden Götter oder Dämonen 'wirklich' und übermächtig in der Welt."[30] What we believe the divine to be directly reflects what we believe human beings to be. Now, Staiger's formulation tends toward a moralistic reading of the poem when he contrasts "Götter" with "Dämonen," and I do not think this is the correct way to understand the exhortation "Sei uns ein Vorbild/Jener geahndeten Wesen!" The issue is not one of representing the divine as the right kind of being instead of the wrong kind. Strictly speaking, the problem comes when we represent the divine as any sort of being at all, when we conceive of the divine as just one among "allen Wesen die wir kennen." To do so is to misconstrue the nature of the divine, which can only be grasped as an intuitive anticipation of an ever-future disclosure. To misconceive the divine involves the same category mistake that occurs when we misrepresent human nature, depriving it of its defining non-conceptual structure. (It is no accident here that the concluding lines also appear in the jussive mood, with all the semantic and epistemic qualities we have seen such syntax to involve.) What emerges is an idol, an image that takes on the illusion of transcendence through the distorted reflection of our own notions.[31] And the implications of such failure do not end there. Our distorted notions of anthropology and theology find expression in our social existence. Here is how Goethe will describe this process in 1822, in the introduction to the second volume of *Zur Naturwissenschaft überhaupt*:

> Denn, indem wir durch unsere Denk- und Empfindungsweise auch äußere Verhältnisse gründen, eine Gesellschaft um uns bilden, oder uns an sie anschließen, so wird ein Inneres zum Äußerlichen; ein solches, wohl aufgenommen oder

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[30] Emil Staiger, *Goethe*, 5th ed. (Zurich and Munich: Artemis Verlag, 1978), vol. 1: 379.

[31] On the concept of the idol, see Jean-Luc Marion, *L'idole et la distance* (Paris: Éditions Grasset & Fasquelle, 1977).

feindlich bestritten, muß erhalten, es muß verteidigt werden, und so sind wir auf einmal vom Geistlichen ins Weltliche, vom Himmlischen ins Irdische und vom ewigen Unwandelbaren in das zeitliche Wechselhafte zurückgezogen.[32]

A society that has emerged from such a distorted conception of both the human and the divine provides the setting for *Iphigenie auf Tauris*.

Iphigenie

Goethe's *Iphigenie* turns on two massive cultural shifts in the Scythian world that provides the setting for the drama: a revolution in religious understanding and the end of human sacrifice.[33] My claim in this section is that these two events are inherently linked to one another in the world of the play. Misconceiving the divine—and therefore misconceiving the human—results in a social order that maintains itself by carefully managing an economy of sacrificial violence.[34]

Bringing this into view will first require saying something about the anthropology developed in a series of events preceding the dramatic action and retrospectively recalled in the course of exchanges among the characters. This is, an aspect of the play that has received surprisingly little scholarly attention. After Diana saves her from death at the hands of her father, Iphigenie finds herself on the Scythian island of Tauris, where she now serves as the goddess's priestess. Under her influence, King Thoas brings to a halt the ancient custom of sacrificing to Diana all foreigners who land on their shores. This development is related by Arkas. Here is his description of the most important changes Iphigenie has brought about on the island:

Du hast hier nichts getan seit deiner Ankunft?

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[32] FA I 25: 52-53.

[33] All citations of the play refer to *Iphigenie auf Tauris. Ein Schauspiel*, FA I 5: 533–619. Lines will be cited by act, scene, and page number of this edition.

[34] Overcoming an innate impulse toward sacrificial violence appears frequently in Goethe's thought, as, for example, when he describes God's command to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac as a preventative intervention meant to anticipate and head off an innate sacrificial impulse in *Dichtung und Wahrheit*. There he refers to "die Götter, welche manchmal, um uns zu versuchen, *jene Engenschaften hervorzukehren scheinen, die der Menschen ihnen anzudichten geneigt ist*, befehlen ihm das Ungeheure," FA I 14: 151, emphasis added.

Wer hat des Königs trüben Sinn erheitert?
Wer hat den alten grausamen Gebrauch,
Daß am Altar Dianens jeder Fremde
Sein Leben blutend läßt, von Jahr zu Jahr,
Mit sanfter Überredung aufgehalten,
Und die Gefangnen vom gewissen Tod
In's Vaterland so oft zurückgeschickt?
Hat nicht Diane, statt erzürnt zu sein,
Daß sie der blut'gen alten Opfer mangelt,
Dein sanft Gebet in reichem Maß erhört?
Umschwebt mit frohem Fluge nicht der Sieg
Das Heer? und eilt er nicht sogar voraus?
Und fühlt nicht jeglicher ein besser Los,
Seitdem der König, der uns weis' und tapfer
So lang geführet, nun sich auch der Milde
In deiner Gegenwart erfreut und uns
Des schweigenden Gehorsams Pflicht erleichtert.[35]

This retelling is structured by four events:

1) Iphigenie consoles Thoas's melancholic disposition;

2) she persuades the king to put an end to the sacrificial custom;

3) this coincides with a new upsurge in military conquests;

4) Thoas softens the methods of his political regime on Iphigenie's account.

Arkas begins and ends his account by noting a change in the king's behavior. That the emotional states of the king dictate the shape of Scythian society has often been viewed as a symbol of a tyrannical organization of the state.[36] While human relations are obviously a central concern of this play, scholars overlook the generality of the play's diagnosis when they focus too narrowly on the structure of Thoas's government. In the passage we have just seen, political considerations do not explain how the shift in Thoas's humor described in 1) and 4) relates to either the end of

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[35] I/2, 558–559, emphasis added.
[36] See, for instance, Werner Frick, "Die Schlächterin und der Tyrann: Gewalt und Aufklärung in europäischen Iphigenie-Dramen des 18. Jahrhunderts," *Goethe-Jahrbuch* 118 (2001): 126–141.

sacrifice in 2) or the sudden preponderance of military victories in 3). How, then, do the four

elements of Arkas's speech hang together?

The unity of this passage becomes clear when, instead of focusing our attention

on the relation between 1) and 2), we follow Arkas's lead and consider 3) as a direct

consequence of 2): the sudden surge of victories is a product of the abolition of human sacrifice.

The only obvious point of contact between a ritual sacrifice and a military campaign is that both

endeavors consist in organized displays of collective violence united against a common foe. And,

in both instances, the target of violence is foreigners, individuals who are not members of the

Scythian community. René Girard has demonstrated at length that such acts of group aggression

serve as principle of order within human societies.[37] When a society collectively designates a

single rival for itself, aggression is channeled away from individual rivalries within the

community and redirected toward an enemy who stands outside of the group. This results in

internal reconciliation that forms the basis of social order.[38]

In respect to collective violence, war and sacrifice exhibit the same structure and carry

out the same unifying function within a community.[39] This explains how the two are connected.

When sacrifice ends on Tauris, it can no longer provide the social benefits that the society relied

on. With the previous source of social unity absent, a new foundation must be found. The

renewed mobilization of which Arkas is so proud comes to fill this role. While the connection

between these developments can only remain obscure when viewed through the lens of

individual psychology, a clear cohesion comes into view when the relationship between

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[37] René Girard, *La violence et le sacré* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1972), 13–30.
[38] "Les sacrifices, la musique, les châtiments et les lois ont une seule et même fin qui est d'unir les cœurs et d'établir l'ordre," Girard, *La violence et le sacré*, 23.
[39] See discussion in Simon Simonse, *Kings of Disaster: Dualism, Centralism and the Scapegoat King in Southeastern Sudan* (Leiden and New York: E. J. Brill, 1992), 214–220.

aggression and violence is considered. Although Iphigenie's humanizing presence has led to the abolition of sacrifice and a moment of flourishing in the society of Tauris, the problem of violence is not resolved; it is only postponed. The principle underlying human sacrifice has been redirected, but not eradicated. Violence continues to be a central feature the Scythian self-understanding, which is symbolized by the fact that Arkas singles out martial success among all the benefits that the end of sacrifice has provided. It is no accident in this connection that he offers a fundamentally superstitious explanation of this development: Arkas's notion of the divine rests on a view of Athena as a partisan goddess who is invested in the outcome of a national military agenda. This fact is of paramount importance, as we shall see. For the moment, it suffices to emphasize that, in his eyes, there is a direct link between the end of sacrifice and an abundance of military victories.

Social relations intertwined with an economy of violence are inherently unstable. Even when it unifies a group, violent activity remains fraught with a volatility and threatens to break out of its fragile channels, destroying the peace that it was meant to preserve. It is just such an occurrence that frames the action of the drama. Although the Scythians have enjoyed success in battle, the king's only son is among the victims that the new campaigns have foreseeably produced. This loss is no private tragedy. It sets into motion a collective political crisis: the crisis of succession. With the loss of an heir to the throne, the political order itself is threatened. In his analysis of how monarchies acquired hegemony in medieval Europe, Norbert Elias concludes that the stability of a monarchical society rests on the presence of an unambiguous royal heir.[40] This will only be the case unequivocally if the king leaves behind an acknowledged adult son. If there is the slightest ambiguity with respect to who will become the successor to the king, then

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[40] Norbert Elias, *Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation. Soziogenetische und psychogenetische Untersuchungen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1997), vol. 2, 188–213.

the fragile unity of the monarchy will quickly descend into rivalry among all those who have

even a remote claim to the throne:

> Man muß sich die Lage dieser Angehörigen des Königshauses vergegenwärtigen:
> Sie sind ihr Leben lang zweite oder dritte. Ihr Gefühl sagt ihnen häufig genug, sie
> könnten bessere und stärkere Kronträger sein, als der Mann, der nun einmal der
> legitime Erbe der Krone und des Hauptbesitzes ist. Zwischen ihnen und diesem Ziel
> steht oft nur ein, oft nur zwei oder drei Menschen.[41]

In such circumstances, even the most precise laws dictating the line to throne are unlikely to

deter claimants to the throne from challenging the legitimate successor. In all likelihood, the

social cohesion guaranteed by dynastic succession will collapse and be replaced by a struggle

among members of the royal household to determine who among them has the greatest political

strength:

> [E]s fehlt nicht an Beispielen dafür in der Geschichte, daß zwei oder noch mehr
> solcher Menschen kurz hintereinander sterben und dem Nächsten in der Reihe den
> Weg zur größeren Herrschaft freimachen. Aber meist führt auch dann noch der Weg
> dahin durch harte Kämpfe mit den Rivalen. Der weniger Mächtige gelangt in der
> Zeit und in dieser Sphäre fast nie zum Thron, wenn er nur einer Seitenlinie des
> Hauses angehört, mag er selbst den gerechtesten Anspruch haben; fast immer
> finden sich in dieser Epoche Andere, die ihm seinen Anspruch streitig machen; ihr
> Anspruch mag schlechter sein, sie werden siegen, wenn sie die Stärkeren sind.[42]

> The people of Tauris may have enjoyed a period of flourishing after Thoas put an end to

the sacrificial custom, but they are now confronted with a political crisis that goes to the very

heart of their societal unity. Arkas describes the situation in the following terms:

> Seitdem der König seinen Sohn verloren,
> Vertraut er wenigen der Seinen mehr,
> Und diesen wenigen nicht mehr wie sonst.
> Mißgünstig sieht er jedes Edlen Sohn
> Als seines Reiches Folger an, er fürchtet
> Ein einsam hülflos Alter, ja vielleicht
> Verwegnen Aufstand und frühzeit'gen Tod.[43]

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[41] Elias, *Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation*, vol. 2, 204.
[42] Elias, *Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation*, vol. 2, 204.
[43] I/2, 559, emphasis added.

Thoas has not only been deprived of children, but has also discovered that his courtiers and relatives are locked in the early stages of a contentious conflict over who will succeed him as king. Indeed, as the final line indicates, the social order has degenerated to so great an extent that the king himself may well become a victim to the nascent struggle for power: the situation threatens to turn violent even before his own death. Thoas recognizes that he must find a resolution, which is why the play begins with him asking for Iphigenie's hand in marriage for the sake of begetting a new heir. She is faced with a cruel alternative: *either* she will accept his proposal, *or* he will reinstate the ritual of human sacrifice. It is as if Thoas believes that reinstituting sacrifice can compensate for the absence of a royal heir. But why does the issue of sacrifice enter into the king's calculations regarding the political crisis with which he finds himself confronted?

The answer to this question has to do with the fact that the succession crisis is interwoven with the logic of collective violence that I introduced earlier. Consider the following excerpt from Thoas's first discussion with Iphigenie:

> Du nahmest Teil an meinen tiefen Schmerzen,
> Als mir das Schwert der Feinde meinen Sohn,
> Den letzten, besten, von der Seite riß.
> So lang die Rache meinen Geist besaß,
> Empfand ich nicht die Öde meiner Wohnung;
> Doch jetzt, da ich befriedigt wiederkehre,
> Ihr Reich zerstört, mein Sohn gerochen ist,
> Bleibt mir zu Hause nichts das mich ergetze.
> Der fröhliche Gehorsam, den ich sonst
> Aus einem jeden Auge blicken sah,
> Ist nun von Sorg' und Unmut still gedämpft.
> Ein jeder sinnt was künftig werden wird,
> Und folgt dem Kinderlosen, weil er muß.[44]

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[44] I/3, 561–562.

The king's description implies two elements that have contributed to undermining the unifying

power of the military conquest. Ironically, the first is the complete destruction of the enemy

kingdom. The end of the war marks the disappearance of a significant activity of collective

meaning. Thoas personally finds himself at a loss after he is deprived of his martial activity. He

has carried out his act of vengeance— he was possessed by "Rache"—but finds that the

disappearance of this obsessive project has left him only with the experience of "die Öde meiner

Wohnung." The vacuum left by the conclusion of the war is an aggravating factor in the broader

political turmoil of Tauris. The second destabilizing development is bound up with the crisis of

succession. As Thoas later informs us, this loss has produced a rift in the society by calling into

question the wisdom of going to war:

> Nun rufen sie die Schuld von meines Sohnes
> Frühzeit'gem Tode lauter über mich.[45]

This remark suggests a significant reversal of Thoas's reputation among his subjects. In their

eyes, he is no longer the victorious leader behind a historic military campaign; instead, he is an

aggressive tyrant, and the extent of his wanton recklessness has found symbolic expression in the

loss of his only son.

Collective violence can only unite a community when its members believe that there is an

absolute difference between the violence they exercise upon their enemy and the violence that

threatens to break out within the group itself. That maintaining a distinction between intra- and

extra-societal conflict coincides with a stable social order is a notion that can be traced to Plato

and features prominently in Book Five of the *Republic*. There, Socrates goes to great lengths to

persuade his interlocutors that the possibility of the city turns on bringing the citizens to conceive

of conflict among themselves in a way that is fundamentally different from how they think of

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[45] I/3, 569.

conflict with other nations. He proposes to accomplish this by sorting both instances of strife into

their own epistemic categories, obscuring their common root in human aggression. This results

in the famous division of human conflict into πόλεμος and στάσις:

> Accordingly, the Greeks being their own people, a quarrel with them will not be called a war [πόλεμος]. It will only be civil strife [στάσις], which they will carry on as men who will some day be reconciled. So they will not behave like a foreign enemy seeking to enslave or destroy, but will try to bring their adversaries to reason by well-meant correction.[46]

The community must act under the belief that violence within the community is "bad" and must

be prevented, while violence against the enemy is "good" and unobjectionable, and at times

should even be encouraged. Of course, this distinction is inherently unstable and exists largely in

the minds of the violent actors, and this fragile division collapses when the king's son is killed in

battle. With such a prominent member of the Tauric society becoming a victim of their own

campaign, the citizens can no longer sustain the ideology that claims that violence directed

outside of the society will prevent violence within the society; they begin to place blame on the

king for taking them to war in the first place. The inner identity of the two forms of violence has

begun to suggest itself, aggravating an already fraught succession crisis.

It is no accident, then, that, immediately after Thoas observes that the people have begun

to hold him responsible for the death of his son, he proposes a return to sacrifice. He says to

Iphigenie:

> Um deinetwillen halt' ich länger nicht
> Die Menge, die das Opfer dringend fordert.[47]

Thoas recognizes clearly that that the society is threatened by an outbreak of repressed violence,

and it is on the basis of this insight that he moves to reinstitute the custom of human sacrifice

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[46] Plato, *Republic*, 5.470e–471a, in *The Republic of Plato*, trans. Francis Macdonald Cornford (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1941), 173.
[47] I/3, 569.

that he had previously abolished. When he refers to the "Opfer" demanded by the masses, he is

not referring exclusively to the sacrificial ritual that he seeks to restore. Thoas understands that

the current crisis has aggravated the repressed violent urges of his subjects, and he is referring

here to the general desire for a victim that such impulses give rise to when they are unleashed. It

is to this circumstance that the restoration of sacrifice responds: if the crisis of succession cannot

be resolved by producing a lawful heir to the throne, the violent impulses of the crowd can at

least be channeled into a contained ritual structure.

Such is the plight that is developed in Act I of Goethe's play. The task the drama sets for

itself is to find a resolution for this crisis without relapsing into a new version of sacrificial

violence.[48] This resolution turns on a new conception of the human, which itself requires a new

concept of the divine. For the sacrificial order is bound up with theological and anthropological

notions that are everywhere shaped by mythical distortions that facilitate the propagation of

violence in a society.[49] In preparation for the new notion of the divine that will emerge at the

conclusion of the drama, the opening acts coordinate different species of such distortions,

presenting a series of theological confusions with a common origin in what I shall call the

mythical mindset.[50]

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[48] Orest's offer to battle Thoas in a ritual duel in Act Five is a paradigm for the ever-present threat of merely reorganizing the economy of violence instead of escaping it. On Orest's challenge and its sacrificial implications, see Martin Swales, "The Human Epiphany: Reflections on Goethe's *Iphigenie auf Tauris* and *Shakespeare's The Winter's Tale*," in *The Present Word: Culture, Society and the Site of Literature: Essays in Honor of Nicholas Boyle*, ed. John Walker (London: Legenda, for Modern Humanities Research Association and Maney Publishing, 2013), 10–21, especially 12–13.

[49] These issues at the heart of Goethe's drama thematically align the play with the central concerns of Enlightenment thinkers in 18th-century Germany. That is, I take the play to be invested in the overcoming of myth and not its rehabilitation, as has been most prominently suggested in Hans Robert Jauß, "Racines und Goethes Iphigenie—Mit einem Nachwort über die Partialität der rezeptionsästhetischen Methode," in *Rezeptionsästhetik. Theorie und Praxis*, ed. Rainer Warning (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1975), 353–400. The most extensive defense of this work as a drama of the Enlightenment remains, of course, Wolfdietrich Rasch, *Goethes 'Iphigenie auf Tauris' als Drama der Autonomie* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1979).

[50] Sigurd Buckhardt forcefully brings out the developmental character of play: "for what we must recognize first is the developmental process that is completed in Iphigenia. Whatever concept pure humanity may mean, its embodiment at the end of the play is an other than at the beginning," Sigurd Burckhardt, "'The voice of truth and of

Two ideas of the divine that are described in the opening acts of the play may serve as examples of the mythical theology presumed by the logic of violence. The first is delivered by Thoas, while Pylades gives voice to the second:

> Es ziemt sich nicht für uns, den heiligen
> Gebrauch mit leicht beweglicher Vernunft
> Nach unserm Sinn zu deuten und zu lenken.
> Tu deine Pflicht, ich werde meine tun.[51]

> Erhebe
> Von diesem Unmut deine Seele; zweifelnd
> Beschleunigest du die Gefahr. Apoll
> Gab uns das Wort: im Heiligtum der Schwester
> Sei Trost und Hülf' und Rückkehr dir bereitet.
> Der Götter Worte sind nicht doppelsinnig,
> Wie der Gedrückte sie im Unmut wähnt.[52]

The conviction that the ways of the gods are inscrutable forms the core of Thoas's religious ethos. Pylades, on the other hand, claims that the declarations of the gods are completely transparent, and it is dangerous to doubt the manifest clarity of their will. At first glance, it might seem that nothing could be more opposed than these theological views. The first clue that this apparent opposition is illusory lies in the fact that both views are proved false in the development of the play. Thoas's view is shown to be wrong at the end of Act Five, when the divine will becomes manifest to the characters in an intelligible form that favors, rather than hinders, their human aspirations. Against Pylades, however, the resolution of the play turns on the recognition that the oracle given to Orest and Pylades was inherently ambiguous. Adding to this ambiguity is the fact that the characters in the play receive no divine confirmation that their revised understanding is, in fact, the correct one. It might be more humane to conclude that Iphigenie is

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humanity': Goethe's *Iphigenie*," in *The Drama of Language: Essays on Goethe and Kleist* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1970), 33–56, here 35. My reading of the play is everywhere indebted to Burckhardt's essay.
[51] I/3, 569.
[52] II/1, 572.

the sister referred to in the oracle, but the desirability of this interpretation cannot stand in for a confirmation of its truth. The events of Act Five refute both Pylades's and Thoas's views: the nature of the divine is not completely impenetrable to the human mind, but nor is it transparent. Neither theory successfully captures the divine, and it is essential to the idea of the play that both go wrong in the same respect: Pylades and Thoas both reduce the gods to an already limited notion of humanity.

In Thoas's case, the anthropomorphizing principal functions as we expect it would, given his insight into the violent tendencies of human beings. Just as he takes human behavior to be a function of these inclinations, so too is he convinced that the god he serves can only be served through violence. Although he is intuitively sensitive to the logic of violence, he is also a victim to its distorting power. Instead of recognizing that collective violence underlies the conciliatory benefits of sacrifice, he conceives of them as a divine miracle worked by the goddess Diana. This is why, when he fails to acquire Iphigenie's consent to marriage, Thoas interprets a political problem—the crisis of succession—in a way that is intimately bound up with a religious problematic. The result is that he takes the social unrest to be connected to the displeasure of a goddess who has been deprived of sacrifice.

Thoas is not the only Scythian to engage in this process of mythologizing the logic of violence. As we have already seen, Arkas correctly recognizes that the cessation of sacrifice is somehow related to their newfound military success, but he falls victim to a similar distortion when he attempts to explain this connection. Instead of recognizing a shift in the economy of violence in Scythian society, he assumes that the goddess has looked kindly upon the change in practice and has rewarded their armies with the power to inflict greater violence upon their enemies. In both cases, the Scythian conception of Diana both results from and obscures the

violence of the community. Her name is invoked only at the service of producing more "good"

violence.

Turning to Pylades, consider the prominence given to cunning and reason in his opening

speech:

> Ich bin noch nicht, Orest, wie du bereit,
> In jenes Schattenreich hinabzugehn.
> Ich *sinne* noch, durch die verworrnen Pfade,
> Die nach der schwarzen Nacht zu führen scheinen,
> Uns zu dem Leben wieder aufzuwinden.
> Ich *denke* nicht den Tod; ich *sinn' und horche*,
> Ob nicht zu irgend einer frohen Flucht
> Die Götter *Rat und Wege* zubereiten.
> Der Tod, gefürchtet oder ungefürchtet,
> Kommt unaufhaltsam. Wenn die Priesterin
> Schon, unsre Locken weihend abzuschneiden,
> Die Hand erhebt, soll dein' und meine Rettung
> *Mein einziger Gedanke* sein.[53]

These remarks are made in an attempt to rouse Orest from a state of melancholic incapacitation,

a kind of existential paralysis that results from his morbid fixation on death. Pylades aims to cure

Orest of his melancholy by appealing to different forms of practical reasoning, planning and

scheming, all in the service of survival. For Pylades, reason is not merely an instrument to escape

death. More importantly, the kind of practical reasoning Pylades has in view serves a therapeutic

function: so long as I engage with the world in a manner that is dictated by practical concern, I

must suspend the contemplative attitude in which mortality can come to take on such looming

significance. Pylades's exhortations to action aim to loosen the transfixing force through which

the thought of death and its finality have overwhelmed Orest and robbed him of the capacity to

act. Thus, Pylades vows to push aside the thought of his approaching end even in his final

moments; at the instant of death, he will still be planning their escape. Pylades is so devoted to

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[53] II/1, 572.

this ideal of prudential reasoning that he even envisions divine intervention in their predicament as a form of rational counsel ("Rat") that will clarify to him the course of action they should adopt.

Pylades assumes that the gods are subject to the demands of human reason, a theological position that his subsequent remarks reinforce:

> Die Götter rächen
> Der Väter Missetat nicht an dem Sohn;
> Ein jeglicher, gut oder böse, nimmt
> Sich seinen Lohn mit seiner Tat hinweg.
> Es erbt der Eltern Segen, nicht ihr Fluch.[54]

Pylades's view coincides in its essential aspects with the theology of Deism: the gods are not vengeful, nor do they attribute to children the guilt for crimes committed by their parents. While this is certainly correct, his arguments fail to free Orest from the haunting superstition of inherited guilt.[55] The specter of bloodguilt will not be fully exorcized until the final page of the play, in tandem, as we shall see, with a reconceptualization of the divine. As they stand, Pylades's religious notions are limited, based on an image of the gods consonant with a world view dominated by the instrumental use of practical reason.[56] This issues in a conception of the divine that is ultimately empty. Although Pylades (rightly) denies the mythical distortions of the gods that are the source of Orest's torment, his theology does not go beyond this moment of demythologization. His notion of the divine is strictly negative, and it is on account of this aspect that it does not rouse Orest. What is required to do so is not a rational critique of the mythical mindset but an interpretive reorientation with respect to the nature of the divine.

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[54] II/1, 575

[55] On the background of this notion, see Monika Fick, "Goethes *Iphigenie auf Tauris* und der Stoff von *Atreus und Thyeste*," in *Literatur und praktische Vernunft*, ed. Frieder von Ammon, Cornelia Rémi and Gideon Stiening (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2016), 357–391.

[56] This point is central to Adorno's interpretation of the play. See Theodor W. Adorno, "Zum Klassizismus von Goethes Iphigenie," in *Noten zur Literatur*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1997), 495–514; see especially 505 and 511.

That this notion of the gods is unsatisfactory is confirmed by the course of action that it leads him to adopt. While Pylades's rational deity might appear benign next to Thoas's bloodthirsty goddess, the final acts of the play show that it is no better equipped to respond to human violence. The following exchange from Act Four provides a paradigm of this process of violent escalation. Iphigenie has become apprehensive at the prospect of deceiving Thoas, who has sheltered her during her time on Tauris. Pylades attempts to reason with her, arguing that an act of deception is entirely justified by the extenuating circumstances:

> Pylades. Der deinen Bruder schlachtet, dem entfliehst du.
> Iphigenie. Es ist derselbst, der mir Gutes tat.
> Pylades. Das ist nicht Undank, was die Not gebeut.
> Iphigenie. Es bleibt wohl Undank; nur die Not entschuldigt's.
> Pylades. Vor Göttern und vor Menschen dich gewiß.[57]

For every moral objection Iphigenie can muster, Pylades has a ready counter-reason. Exchanges like this one make up much of the fourth act of the play, and Pylades provisionally wins the argument. In each case, Pylades contends that, in this special instance, actions with the external appearance of aggression or deceit do not count as violence. It is by rigid adherence to such strategic calculations that violence comes to appear as something other than what it is. The trio eventually concludes that running the risk of a violent exchange is not only permissible, but even morally necessary.

This remark requires the immediate emendation that the arguments offered in Act Four are plausible, and Pylades is no Sophist. The problem is not Pylades's character, but the rationalist restrictions that prevent him from perceiving the full scope of the moral question at hand. The final line in the exchange just cited is particularly revealing in this regard. Here Pylades attempts to cut through the complexities of the situation to arrive at the essential issue.

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[57] IV/4, 603.

What he deems to be decisive for the current dilemma is whether another would find something to blame in her behavior. It as if he were saying, "Nobody would fault you. What else could matter?" Pylades is certainly calling attention to a significant element in ethical deliberation, but the subsequent action of the play indicates that he is wrong to assume that it exhausts the issue. Although Iphigenie is unable to produce a moral argument against Pylades's proposed course, her conscience is not eased, and she eventually rejects his strategy of deception. It is because he has limited the field of morally relevant factors through this sort of rationalism that Pylades's moralism results in the same violence that he accuses Thoas of perpetuating.

It is important to emphasize that neither position is simply "wrong." Pylades and Thoas have both recognized an essential feature of sociality and religion, and in this respect their ideas have merit. The problem is that each interpretation is limited by a one-sided emphasis on a single aspect of human existence. The consequence of this is that both Pylades and Thoas reduce the divine to their limited notion of the human, with the result that religion turns into ideology at the service of violence. It is important to note that this violence does not issue from the mere fact of conceiving divinity in our anthropological terms. As we have seen in the previous section, anthropomorphism is not an intrinsic mistake but an inescapable aspect of our notion of God. The problem is not that Pylades and Thoas represent the gods in human terms, but *which* notions of humanity provide the model for their theology. This is the key to understanding Iphigenie's prayer in the crisis at the end of Act Four. There, she addresses the gods directly in the following appeal:

> Rettet mich,
> Und rettet euer Bild in meiner Seele![58]

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[58] IV/4, 605.

This formulation is a crucial addition included by Goethe in the second edition of the drama.[59] Everything we have seen so far should lead us to hear in the words "euer Bild in meiner Seele" an echo of the Christian notion that humanity bears the image and likeness of God. We would miss the thought of these lines entirely if we took "save your image in my soul" to mean exclusively "protect the notion that I have of you." Iphigenie is not simply asking for an image she already possesses to be preserved; she is asking for a redemption of the gods, a redemption that will occur *through* the actions taken by Iphigenie in the final act of the play.[60] Importantly, Iphigenie does not ask the gods for a sign or a miracle. Instead, her invocation begins to move beyond the mythical conception of the divine in two respects: first, she recognizes that the image of divinity that has governed the play is deeply flawed, and, second, she discovers that revising this notion is bound to articulating a new conception of the relation between the divine and its reflection in the human soul. Put differently, humanity must be rethought in order to rethink God.[61] Only on this condition can the society escape the cycle of the violence that governs the world of the play.

This moral-theological resolution occurs in the fifth act and plays out over a development that comprises four stages. The first occurs at the beginning of Iphigenie's exchange with Thoas and has to do with her own background as a victim of sacrificial violence. The context is Thoas's cross-examination of her motives for hesitating to carry out the ritual. In her initial attempt to

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[59] On the formal constraints entailed by the versification of the drama, see Beth Bjorklund, "Goethe's 'Iphigenie' in Prose and Verse," *Style* 21, no. 3 (1987): 439–463.

[60] To anticipate, the key moment here will occur the next time she directly addresses the gods: "Verherrlicht *durch mich* die Wahrheit!" V/3, 611, emphasis added. The italicized phrase (also unique to the verse edition) signals a recognition that the divine principle is inseparable from an anthropological principle, and that the two must work in tandem to resolve the mythical complex of the play.

[61] This obviously echoes the central theme of "Das Göttliche." That a shift in our experience of temporality in essential to this transition has been recently argued in Kai Spanke, "Zeitenwende auf Tauris. Zum epistemologischen und temporalen Umbruch in Goethes 'Iphigenie'," *Goethe-Jahrbuch* 131 (2014): 21–29.

deter Thoas, Iphigenie does not reveal that one of the victims is her brother but chooses instead

to explain the source of her pity for the foreigners only in terms of her past as a sacrificial victim:

> Lös't die Erinnerung des gleichen Schicksals
> Nicht ein verschloßnes Herz zum Mitleid auf?
> Wie mehr denn meins! In ihnen seh' ich mich.
> Ich habe vorm Altare selbst gezittert,
> Und feierlich umgab der frühe Tod
> Die Kniende; das Messer zuckte schon
> Den lebensvollen Busen zu durchbohren;
> Mein Innerstes entsetzte wirbelnd sich,
> Mein Auge brach, und—ich fand mich gerettet.
> Sind wir, was Götter gnädig uns gewährt,
> Unglücklichen nicht zu erstatten schuldig?[62]

The most important words in this passage are "In ihnen seh' ich mich." This formula represents

an identification with the victims of the ritual, an identification that introduces a form of

solidarity that could not have been initiated by any other character in the drama. As the

archetypal victim of ritual violence in the Greek mythical world, Iphigenie's expression of

sympathy for the two foreigners is not a moral sentiment but an expression of literal identity.

Others—such as Arkas—might be able to pity the victims from the external standpoint of an

observer, but only she can personally identify with the existential perspective of the ritual victim.

She is also the only victim to survive being sacrificed. And this survival was not a product of

human effort; the gods themselves saved her from death. Iphigenie takes this experience of

divine intervention to be a revelation of their will. She cannot be indifferent to the fate of

sacrificial victims, just as—and this is essential—the gods were not indifferent to her: "Sind wir,

was Götter gnädig uns gewährt,/Unglücklichen nicht zu erstatten schuldig?" What these lines

introduce is a divinely sanctioned conception of *solidarity with victims*. With respect to the

sacrificial complex of the play, introducing the possibility of such solidarity is simultaneously to

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[62] V/3, 609.

turn against the sacrificial mechanism, which, as we have seen, is built on the principle of violent

unanimity against the victim. This identification with the victim of collective violence, an

identification of which Iphigenie is uniquely capable, marks the first step in the drama's

resolution of its theological-anthropological crisis.

Nevertheless, Thoas is unmoved and continues to insist that the ancient sacrificial custom

was initiated by the gods. This leads to the second stage in the theological reconceptualization

that plays out in Act Five. This leads Iphigenie to deliver in Thoas's presence an extended

monologue composed almost entirely of rhetorical questions regarding the moral and existential

consequences of the action she is about to take. At the end of her reflections—immediately

before revealing Orest's identity to Thoas—Iphigenie once more addresses the gods directly as

she did in Act Four, this time in more of a challenge than a prayer:

> Allein Euch leg' ich's auf die Kniee! Wenn
> Ihr wahrhaft seid, wie ihr gepriesen werdet;
> So zeigt's durch euern Beistand und verherrlicht
> Durch mich die Wahrheit![63]

At the center of Iphigenie's address is a notion of the divine as truth.[64] It is essential to this

notion that truth is inadequate as long as it remains abstract—if it is only a divine title with

which the gods are "praised." It is to such abstraction that Iphigenie objects. Behind her prayer

stands the conviction that truthfulness is inseparable from its manifestation in truthful action, and

that this requirement holds even for the divine. If the concept of divine truth is to have any

meaning at all, then the truthfulness of the gods must find expression in the human world. This is

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[63] V/3, 611.

[64] As David Wellbery puts it in a forthcoming essay: "One might say that Iphigenie's words test the gods' adequacy to the concept of divinity she herself considers the (only) relevant standard. And that standard is clearly enough the 'glory' of a life lived in truth. The reinterpretation of the concept of divinity in terms of the normative space of truthfulness and mutual recognition proves to be the decisive step in turning the dramatic conflict toward reconciliation," see David E. Wellbery, "'Dies Bildnis ist bezaubernd schön': Notes on the Morphology of Eighteenth-Century Drama" (forthcoming).

why Iphigenie calls on the gods to glorify the truth "durch mich"—a significant qualification absent from the first version of the play. The suggestion is that divine truthfulness can only achieve realization in cooperation with human activity.[65] Truth, in other words, is inseparable from its embodied presence within the human community.[66] The emergence of this understanding of the divine marks the essential step in the resolution of the drama.

The fact that Iphigenie has just identified a notion of the divine that is essentially connected to the concept of truth leads directly to the third theological development in Act Five, which occurs in the following exchange with Thoas:

> THOAS
> 　　　　　　　　Du glaubst, es höre
> Der rohe Scythe, der Barbar, die Stimme
> Der Wahrheit und der Menschlichkeit, die Atreus,
> Der Grieche, nicht vernahm?
> IPHIGENIE　　　　　　　Es hört sie jeder,
> Geboren unter jedem Himmel, dem
> Des Lebens Quelle durch den Busen rein
> Und ungehindert fließt.[67]

A notion of the divine as truth precludes the possibility that the gods are partisan creatures who favor some nations and plot against others, and here Iphigenie draws attention to this incompatibility. This is explicit in her dneial that "die Stimme der Wahrheit und der Menschlichkeit" is allotted to certain nations but denied to others. The ability to recognize and

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[65] Arthur Henkel refers to this dimension of Iphigenie's prayer as "die humane Selbstbehauptung"; see his discussion of the mutuality of the human and the divine in Arthur Henkel, "Die 'verteufelt humane' Iphigenie. Ein Vortrag," in *Goethe-Erfahrungen. Studien und Vorträge* (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1982), 81–101.

[66] It is no accident here that this appeal to the gods brings into connection two central theological concepts from the Gospel of John: truth and glory. Everywhere in John's Gospel, Jesus describes his life and mission as the glorification of God the Father. For John, the glory of God is no static attribute inhering in the divine nature; glory is identical with the divine intervention in human history culminating in the Incarnation. Terence James Reed takes John 17:1 to be the point of reference here, but the structure in Iphigenie's speech has many parallels in John's gospel, for example: 12:23, 12:28, 17:4, 17:5, 17:10; see the remarks on p. 222 of Terence James Reed, "Iphigenie auf Tauris," in *Goethe Handbuch. Dramen*, edited by Theo Buck (Stuttgart and Weimar: Verlag J.B. Metzler, 1997), 195–228.

[67] V/3, 612.

respond to truth is an inherent capacity of the human being; the subject of its claims is "jeder, geboren unter jedem Himmel." This reinterpretation of the divine will involves crucial implications for the notion of inherited guilt that had dominated the play. If to sin against the gods is to defy the universal claim of truth, then guilt cannot be the product of an ordinance issued by an inscrutable divine will. In the world of the drama, this means that guilt is no longer a question of an individual's predetermined fate or inherited pollution.[68] Instead, guilt and merit become a consequence of the free exercise of morality.[69] With the demythologization of guilt, there emerges the prospect of authentic moral freedom.[70]

Freedom, of course, is what has been absent in the world of the drama. The five characters all feel their actions to be directed by external compulsion. The prospect of a religiously informed freedom that is subject only to the demands of truth leads us to the culmination of the drama, the fourth and final development in the theological revolution of Act Five. It is Orest who gives it expression:

> Die strengen Bande
> Sind nun gelös't; du bist den Deinen wieder,
> Du Heilige, geschenkt. Von dir berührt
> War ich geheilt; in deinen Armen faßte

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[68] On the history of the connection between fate and guilt, see Michael Theunissen, *Schicksal in Antike und Moderne* (Munich: Carl Friedrich von Siemens Stiftung, 2004).

[69] The discovery of moral freedom is the essential element in the proof that Iphigenie had demanded of the goodness and truthfulness of the gods. The idea of morality brings with it a species of human autonomy that is available to all and that can be realized—at last in principle—under any set of circumstances. On the issues involved here, see Robert B. Pippin, "Kant and the Problem of Tragedy," in *Philosophy by Other Means: The Arts in Philosophy and Philosophy in the Arts* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2021), 19–38.

[70] Of course, that morality can achieve the sort of autonomy envisioned here is a fundamentally Kantian notion that has been challenged by thinkers as diverse as Hegel and Nietzsche. In his essay on *Die Wahlverwandtschaften*, Walter Benjamin has even suggested that it is a view that Goethe himself would later call into question. Describing what he takes to be the fundamental disorder in the world of the novel from 1809, Benjamin writes: "Mit dem Schwinden des übernatürlichen Lebens im Menschen wird sein natürliches Schuld, ohne daß es im Handeln gegen die Sittlichkeit fehle. Denn nun steht es in dem Verband des bloßen Lebens, der am Menschen als Schuld sich bekundet. Dem Unglück, das sie über ihn heraufbeschwört, entgeht er nicht. Wie jede Regung in ihm neue Schuld, wird jede seiner Taten Unheil auf ihn ziehen. Dies nimmt in jenem alten Märchenstoff vom Überlästigen der Dichter auf, in dem der Glückliche, der allzu reichlich gibt, das Fatum unauflöslich an sich fesselt. Auch dies das Gebaren des Verblendeten," Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1972–1989), vol. 1, 139.

> Das Übel mich mit allen seinen Klauen
> Zum letztenmal, und schüttelte das Mark
> Entsetzlich mir zusammen; dann entfloh's
> Wie eine Schlange zu der Höhle.[71]

What Orest is describing in this passage is a liberation from his feverish illusion of an unalterable guilt which he had inherited from the sins of his ancestors. This liberation becomes fully possible only after the disenchantment of the image of an inscrutable and vengeful deity that animated his melancholic paralysis. What has taken place is a reconceptualization of the divine along the lines that we have seen to be called for in "Das Göttliche": the divine principle is no longer thought of as a quantitatively intensified version of worldly beings. With this religious revolution complete, the mythical mindset that supported the cycle of sacrificial violence loses its hold. This is no mere reconfiguration of the economy of violence. For the first time in the play, the possibility of a non-sacrificial anthropology comes into view: "Die strengen Bande sind nun gelöst."

Finitude

By way of transition to what I am designating as the second phase in Goethe's thought on the divine, I want to consider a profoundly theological passage that appears near the beginning of the *Farbenlehre*. In two of the densest sentences of the entire book, Goethe describes the relationship between light and vision in the following way:

> Das Auge hat sein Dasein dem Licht zu danken. Aus gleichgültigen tierischen Hülfsorganen ruft sich das Licht ein Organ hervor, das seines Gleichen werde.[72]

I cannot offer a full interpretation of this passage here, but it suffices for my purposes to highlight two aspects manifestly drawn from the Christian theological tradition.[73] First, the

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[71] V/6, 617–618.

[72] FA I 23/1: 24.

[73] The most suggestive reading of this passage that I am aware of is that of Hans Lipps; see Hans Lipps, "Goethes Farbenlehre. Ansätze zu einer Interpretation," in *Die Wirklichkeit des Menschen*, ed. Evamaria von Busse (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1977), 108–124, especially 109–111. I understand my emphasis on the theological dimensions of this passage as a contribution to Lipps's phenomenological approach to understanding the *Farbenlehre* and Goethe's scientific writings more generally. For a reading emphasizes the divergences between

statement that the eye owes its existence to light is a paraphrase of the Christian notion of creation. Creation is a distinctly biblical category and appears in some form in nearly every major Christian doctrine. To be sure, Goethe's text does not contain the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*: light summons the eye into existence out of existing animal organs. Nevertheless, that the conception of creation in this passage is a theological one is confirmed by a second, even more explicitly religious element. The remark that light creates the eye to be "ein Organ…, das seines Gleichen werde" is an explicit invocation the uniquely biblical notion that human beings are fashioned in the image and likeness of their creator.[74] The defining feature of this doctrine is that humans are distinguished from other animals in that their very nature reflects the divine. This, in turn, entails that knowledge of the divine is in some way bound to knowledge of human nature, a notion that is prominently thematized in both "Das Göttliche" and *Iphigenie auf Tauris*, as we have seen.[75]

If Goethe's early poetic works explored the ethical and social implications of human finitude, his later scientific works systematically thematize the epistemological implications of a finite notion of human reason. It is here that his engagement with the animating issues of German Idealism comes explicitly to the fore. In what follows, I will discuss a selection of passages drawn from Goethe's scientific writings—predominately from the *Farbenlehre*—that thematize the structure of human knowledge. All these texts have as their background Goethe's

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Goethe's thought and phenomenology, see Hermann Schmitz, "Goethes Farbenlehre im Licht der neuen Phänomenologie," in *Höhlengänge. Über Die Gegenwärtige Aufgabe der Philosophie* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2015), 197–210.

[74] See the helpful overview of this doctrine in Gottlieb Söhngen, "Die biblische Lehre von der Gottebenbildlichkeit des Menschen," in *Die Einheit in der Theologie. Gesammelte Abhandlungen, Aufsätze, Vorträge* (Munich: Karl Zink Verlag, 1952), 173–211.

[75] As Schöne puts it: "Die 'naturgeschichtliche' Einsicht, daß wir nur deshalb das Licht zu erblicken vermögen, weil unser Auge 'sonnenhaft' sei, versicherte ihn der 'metaphysischen' Wahrheit, daß uns nur deshalb 'Göttliches entzücken' könne, weil 'des Gottes eigne Kraft' in uns lebe--ein wenig theologischer formuliert: Daß die Gottebenbildlichkeit des Menschen Voraussetzung seiner Gotteserkenntnis sei," *Goethes Farbentheologie*, 102–103.

early engagement with the thought of Spinoza. Eckart Förster has documented the enormous influence that the latter's conception of an intuitive understanding exercised on the methodology of Goethe's morphological studies, but my theme here will emphasize a different aspect of his thought with Spinozistic origins.[76] The essential features of this strand, which we can provisionally designate as the participatory quality of our knowledge of the absolute, are all on view in the opening paragraph of the 1783 essay "Die Natur":

> Natur! Wir sind von ihr umgeben und umschlungen—unvermögend aus ihr herauszutreten, und unvermögend tiefer in sie hinein zu kommen. Ungebeten und ungewarnt nimmt sie uns in den Kreislauf ihres Tanzes auf und treibt sich mit uns fort, bis wir ermüdet sind und ihrem Arme entfallen.[77]

The guiding metaphor of this passage is that of submersion. Nature can only be experienced from within; there is no external standpoint, as it were, from which we could examine it as an object of pure contemplation. This entails that the subject's knowledge of nature is always bound to her knowledge of herself as a participating element of the object that is known. The passage just cited describes the status of subjectivity in our knowledge of nature, but an analogous structure holds for our knowledge of objects. For no object can be considered in isolation from the totality of nature in which it participates. My claim is that this structure of knowledge continues in Goethe's mature thought and expresses a conception of human reason as essentially finite, in the sense of that term developed in Chapter Two. Explaining this will first require turning to the extended discussion of these issues that occurs at the beginning of the *Farbenlehre*.

Albrecht Schöne has shown in minute detail that Goethe's true interest in the *Farbenlehre* is not color, but light, and that the book's circuitous method results from the

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[76] For Förster's contribution, see Förster, *Die 25 Jahre der Philosophie*, 253–276.

[77] FA I 25: 11. I include this text here despite the controversies surrounding its authorship because of the clarity with which it expresses the participatory dynamic that underlies the moment of poetic creation in Goethe's early thought; see pp. 1–8 of David E. Wellbery, "On the Logic of Change in Goethe's Work," *Goethe Yearbook* 21 (2014): 1-21.

unusual conditions under which light comes to be known.[78] The distinctive qualities of light that call for such an approach, however, cannot be delineated prior to the investigation itself. It is essential to the task of the book to bring into view the epistemological character of our knowledge of light, an insight that is inseparable from the theoretical praxis carried out in the course of Goethe's analysis. Only at the end of the book is it possible to grasp what would count as knowledge of light to begin with.[79]

This is why the *Vorrede* begins by posing in apparently naïve form the conception of light that the remainder of the book is dedicated to rejecting: "[o]b man nicht, indem von den Farben gesprochen werden soll, vor allen Dingen des Lichtes zu erwähnen habe."[80] The proposed procedure would derive the nature of color by examining its source, the light from which color emerges. Introducing this possibility as an indirect question in the distancing subjunctive mood anticipates Goethe's negative response. Indeed, he immediately proceeds to claim that beginning an investigation of the colors by considering the nature of the light would be methodologically backwards. The problem with such a top-down approach, moreover, is not merely a matter of its suitability for this particular empirical object, but a fundamental misconception of the nature of human understanding:

> Denn eigentlich unternehmen wir umsonst, das Wesen eines Dinges auszudrücken.
> Wirkungen werden wir gewahr, und eine vollständige Geschichte dieser
> Wirkungen umfaßte wohl allenfalls das Wesen jenes Dinges.[81]

Colors are products of the prior phenomenon of light, to which we have no immediate access. Of course, the passage suggests that a similar structure governs our relation to phenomena in

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[78] See Albrecht Schöne, *Goethes Farbentheologie* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1987), 84-93.
[79] These formulations paraphrase the argument of Joel B. Lande, "Acquaintance with Color: Prolegomena to a Study of Goethe's *Zur Farbenlehre*," *Goethe Yearbook* 23 (2016): 143-169; see especially the remarks on 149.
[80] FA I 23/1: 12.
[81] FA I 23/1: 12.

general, which do not appear in nucleic immediacy but make themselves known by the effects that they bring about. But this general form is brought into exemplary relief when it comes to light. This is because light is invisible. Strictly speaking, we never perceive light directly; we *only* perceive its manifestations.

To explain this claim, Goethe goes on to suggest that human knowledge finds paradigmatic expression in our understanding of other human beings. He writes:

> Vergebens bemühen wir uns, den Charakter eines Menschen zu schildern; man stelle dagegen seine Handlungen, seine Taten zusammen, und ein Bild des Charakters wird uns entgegentreten.[82]

Understanding an individual always involves a hermeneutic relation between deed and character. The issue is to distinguish between the elements in an individual's personality that are secondary and changeable from those that are essential, the qualities a person could not compromise without ceasing to be the individual that they are. Such knowledge is not a matter of insight into a static essence or definition that a person somehow "has." For we never perceive an individual's character directly, only its expressions in her activities, and no single deed can exhaustively express the constitutive qualities of her character. The difficulties are compounded by the fact that some actions manifest who an individual is to a greater degree than others, and others fail to express it at all. This is not to deny that individuals do in fact have an underlying character that plays a central role in determining their actions. The point, rather, is that we only have access to such character by means of a complex interpretative process of relating outer actions to an inner disposition, so that there can be no "leaving behind" expressive actions in order to grasp an individual's personality in its purity.[83] Goethe's claim is such an interpretive process structures

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[82] FA I 23/1: 12.

[83] This suggestion—that the interpretive process through which we understand individual agency provides a paradigm for other domains of human knowledge—echoes a number of Hegel's central claims, most notably regarding art and history. See the discussions of these issues in chapters five and six of Robert B. Pippin, *Hegel's*

our access to the world more generally, which is why it would be a mistake to explain the phenomenon of color by beginning with a doctrine of light. Light cannot be grasped in its immediate essence any more than an individual's character. It can only be interpreted in its manifestations, and the medium in which light manifests itself is color: "Die Farben sind Taten des Lichts, Taten und Leiden. In diesem Sinne können wir von denselben Aufschlüsse über das Licht erwarten."[84]

Another aspect of the passage cited above must be stressed here: "Denn eigentlich unternehmen wir umsonst, das Wesen eines Dinges auszudrücken." It is impossible to overestimate the significance of this remark for the project of the *Farbenlehre*. While context of this statement is an explanation of the relationship between knowledge and light, the formulation itself expresses a general claim about the nature of knowledge. The ensuing paragraphs describe how this epistemic situation pertains to the relationship between light and color, but the generalizing force of this opening assertion implies that these reflections bear on human knowledge as a whole. Insofar as the affinity between light and color expresses a constitutive quality of our knowledge of things, Goethe's description of this relationship functions as a paradigm for human knowing in the most general sense.

This becomes clear as Goethe continues his discussion of the relationship between light and color, where we learn that the hermeneutic situation of knowledge is even more complicated. He writes:

Practical Philosophy: Rational Agency as Ethical Life (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 121–179, as well as chapter two of Pippin, *After the Beautiful*, 27–62. The central point of divergence between the two thinkers lies in the fact that Goethe sees this hermeneutic configuration as the animating principle of all human knowledge, rather than restricted to specific spheres of experience.
[84] FA I 23/1: 12.

> Farben und Licht stehen zwar unter einander in dem genausten Verhältnis, aber wir müssen uns beide als der ganzen Natur angehörig denken: denn sie ist es ganz, die sich dadurch dem Sinne des Auges besonders offenbaren will.[85]

As it turns out, the hermeneutic circle of light and color is itself a component of a broader interpretive context: nature as a whole. Comprehending the nature of light is not simply a matter of finding a method to systematically investigate instances of color. Both light and color participate in and reflect the totality of nature. They bear within themselves the whole within which they participate, so to speak.[86] This collective interdependency accounts for Goethe's subsequent claim that there can be no naïve, immediate grasping of *any* phenomenon in nature:

> Denn das bloße Anblicken einer Sache kann uns nicht fördern. Jedes Ansehen geht über in ein Betrachten, jedes Betrachten in ein Sinnen, jedes Sinnen in ein Verknüpfen, und so kann man sagen, daß wir schon bei jedem aufmerksamen Blick in die Welt theoretisieren.[87]

Our encounter with any object is embedded in a host of assumptions and commitments external to the object itself. Acquiring meaningful knowledge of even the most insignificant object can only be done by simultaneously attending to and reflecting on such commitments—each of which, in turn, relies on its own suite of presuppositions. As Thomas Pfau writes, "Belonging to the order of *praxis* rather than *episteme*, Goethean science constitutes a hermeneutic event, a process of 'understanding' whereby sustained observation continually feeds back into the observer's concurrent quest for intelligent self-determination and vice-versa. Hence, all genuine apprehension for Goethe is possible only within an already existing framework of

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[85] FA I 23/1: 12.

[86] The interrelatedness of all natural phenomena is a central assumption throughout Goethe's scientific writings. See, for instance, the lapidary formulation of this issue in the 1793 essay "Der Versuch als Vermittler zwischen Subjekt und Objekt": In der lebendigen Natur geschieht nichts, was nicht in einer Verbindung mit dem Ganzen stehe, und wenn uns die Erfahrungen nur isoliert *erscheinen*, wenn wir die Versuche nur als isolierte Fakta anzusehen haben, so wird dadurch nicht gesagt, daß sie isoliert *seien*, es ist nur die Frage: wie finden wir die Verbindung dieser Phänomene, dieser Begebenheiten?" FA I 25: 33.

[87] FA I 23/1: 14.

comprehension."[88] The interpretative paradigm, in other words, serves as the structuring

principle of all human knowledge, such that there can be no getting behind the hermeneutic

framework to a standpoint that is not fallible and provisional.[89] It is on the basis of this universal

claim about the interpretive nature of knowledge that we should understand the remarkable claim

that the essence of a thing can never be expressed.

This carries a significant implication for the argument presented in the *Farbenlehre*: the

concepts developed in the book are not of the sort whose truth can be definitively demonstrated.

Toward the end of the Introduction, Goethe puts the point this way:

> Diese Art sich die Sache vorzustellen, können wir niemand aufdringen. Wer sie
> bequem findet, wie wir, wird sie gern in sich aufnehmen. Eben so wenig haben
> wir Lust, sie künftig durch Kampf und Streit zu verteidigen. Denn es hatte von
> jeher etwas Gefährliches, von der Farbe zu handeln, dergestalt daß einer unserer
> Vorgänger gelegentlich gar zu äußern wagt: Hält man dem Stier ein rotes Tuch
> vor, so wird er wütend; aber der Philosoph, wenn man nur überhaupt von Farbe
> spricht, fängt an zu rasen.[90]

The method pursued by *Farbenlehre* does not seek to produce logical necessity but to arrange its

component experiments in such a manner that their mutual fit becomes visible, so that the reader

finds this view of things "bequem." In saying this, Goethe is not abandoning his claim to the

truth of the *Farbenlehre* or reducing its doctrines to an expression of subjective taste. The point,

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[88] Thomas Pfau, "'All is Leaf': Difference, Metamorphosis, and Goethe's Phenomenology of Knowledge," *Studies in Romanticism* 49, no. 1 (2010): 3-41. On the practical character of knowledge in the *Farbenlehre*, see the detailed considerations in Joel Lande, "Form as Bond: Learning to See with Goethe's *Zur Farbenlehre*," *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie* 138, no. 2 (2019): 157-178. The semantic prevalence of activity and practice in Goethe's scientific writings becomes even more prominent in his late work, as in the following remarks from his 1823 essay "Älteres, beinahe Veraltetes": "So wiederhole ich [meine Überzeugung]: daß man auf diesen höheren Stufen nicht *wissen* kann, sondern *tun* muß: so wie an einem Spiele wenig zu wissen und alles zu leisten ist. Die Natur hat uns das Schachbrett gegeben, aus dem wir nicht hinaus wirken können, noch wollen; sie hat uns die Steine geschnitzt, deren Wert, Bewegung und Vermögen nach und nach bekannt werden; nun ist es an uns, Züge zu tun, von denen wir uns Gewinn versprechen; dies versucht nun ein jeder auf seine Weise und läßt sich nicht einreden," FA I 25: 58–59.
[89] It is significant in this context that Goethe describes the origin of knowledge in affective terms. The interaction between mind and world involves a suite of conditions beyond what we usually designate as theoretical in the strict sense: "Die *Lust* zum Wissen wird bei dem Menschen zuerst dadurch *angeregt*, daß er bedeutende Phänomene gewahr wird, die seine Aufmerksamkeit an sich *ziehen*," FA I 23/1: 23, emphasis added.
[90] FA I 23/1: 25.

rather, is that the truths expressed in the book are first of all a matter of insight into a species of inner rectitude, the perception of "a unity that is the object's own."[91] "Bequemlichkeit" is not a matter of preference, but of a general sensitivity to the coherence of the book's conclusions with the phenomena it sets out to investigate. This clarifies Goethe's reference to the philosopher in this passage, whose appearance presents a marked departure from the natural scientific considerations that have governed the Preface and Introduction. The sort of philosopher that Goethe has in view is one who has restricted the realm of philosophical relevance to a rigidly argumentative approach. Such a philosopher will have nothing to do with a theory of colors, since this domain is concerned primarily with the hermeneutic moment of rationality and requires the hermeneutic approach that the rationalist philosopher is at pains to avoid.

Given everything that has been said so far, it is no accident that the central topic of the Preface and Introduction of the *Farbenlehre* is light. It is in its reflections on the nature of light that the book's conception of rational finitude acquires its distinctive contours. Light, after all, along with its attendant activities of vision and illumination, has served as *the* foundational metaphor in western conceptions of truth.[92] The animating concern of the opening reflections of the *Farbenlehre*, that is, brings with it a semantic register that is nearly coextensive with the metaphorics of truth and knowledge in western thought. The *Farbenlehre*'s concern with human knowing is not a secondary one, as if it were the necessary byproduct of reflecting on an individual form of knowledge. Especially in these early sections, truth and reason in the broadest sense of those terms are foundational to the project of the book. Not that we are given a treatise

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[91] Eckart Förster, "Goethe and the 'Auge des Geistes'," *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 75, no. 1 (2001): 87–101, here p. 90.
[92] The foundational discussion of this topic remains Hans Blumenberg, "Licht als Metapher der Wahrheit," *Studium Generale* 10 (1957): 432–447. See also Joseph Ratzinger, "Licht und Erleuchtung," *Studium Generale* 13 (1960): 368–378.

on the nature of human rationality; for reasons that will become clear shortly, the *Farbenlehre*

forgoes what might pass as recognizable philosophical argumentation in favor of examining a

suite of phenomena that have as the expressive core for describing humanity's relation to truth:

sight, unveiling, illumination, disclosure, and, significantly, revelation.[93]

The fact that *Offenbarung* is a central concept in the *Farbenlehre* is a natural

consequence of the fact that it operates in this metaphorical register.[94] A theological framework

frequently accompanies the notions of illumination and perception, explaining their alethic

properties by appealing to an ontology of the divine.[95] The metaphysical cosmology that this can

give rise to, such as the emanation theories of Neoplatonism or Augustine's notion of

illumination, is, of course, alien to Goethe's text. Nevertheless, a host of recognizably

theological concerns can be detected throughout the Preface and Introduction. Consider, for

instance, Schöne's characterization of Goethe's remarks concerning the unknowability of light:

> Auch wenn man gelten läßt, was er da generalisierend vom "Wesen eines Dinges"
> und "Charakter eines Menschen" behauptet—die Vorstellung, daß ein
> unaussprechliches, unbegreifliches Wesen nurmehr in den Wirkungen,
> Handlungen, Taten sich ausspreche und begreiflich mache, die von ihm ausgehen,
> ist im religiösen Denken begründet […] er [spricht] im Mittel des Lichts von der
> Unaussprechbarkeit und Unbegreiflichkeit des unbekannten Gottes, der sich
> offenbart in dem, was er wirkt, in seinen Handlungen, seinen Taten.[96]

The key phrase in this passage is "im religösen Denken *begründet*." We have already seen that

light is meant to stand in for knowledge in general, which means that Goethe's interest in

religious imagery cannot be exclusively, or even primarily theological. The issue is rather that

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[93] Semantically, the subjective capacity for vision is just as saturated with theological resonances as the objective phenomenon of light; see Romano Guardini, "Das Auge und die religiöse Erkenntnis," *Die Schildgenossen* 20, no. 3 (1941): 108–116.

[94] For a general overview of the term "Offenbarung" in Goethe's oeuvre, see Christian Clement, "'Offenbares Geheimnis' oder 'geheime Offenbarung'? Goethes Märchen und die Apokalypse," *Goethe Yearbook* 17 (2010): 239–257.

[95] See Hans Blumenberg, *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*, trans. Robert Savage (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010), 6–12.

[96] Albrecht Schöne, *Goethes Farbentheologie* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1987), 89–90.

the notion of truth he wants to articulate requires conceptual resources native to religious thought.[97] Schöne's example is the clearest instance of this, linking as it does Goethe's claim that light can only be known by its effects with the well-known theological tradition of the unknowability of the divine essence.[98]

To summarize, the methodological reflections which open the *Farbenlehre* operate within two semantic domains: knowledge of truth on the one hand, and a theological conception of divine incomprehensibility on the other. It is in the interplay of these discursive domains that the full philosophical scope of Goethe's project comes into view. This conjunction is not unique to the *Farbenlehre*. The conception of truth developed in this text receives programmatic formulation throughout Goethe's oeuvre. Consider the following remark from Goethe's letter to Reinhard of October 7th, 1810, where he writes: "die Natur des Lichts wird wohl nie ein Sterblicher aussprechen; und sollte er es können, so würde er von niemanden, so wenig wie das Licht, verstanden werden."[99] Two elements are worth noting in this statement. First, it reiterates the unknowability of light, here in terms of the performative impossibility of the communicative act that would express such knowledge. Second, this unknowability is brought into connection with a basic fact of the human condition: our mortality. Light lies within the epistemic domain proper to a divine being; it is inaccessible to mortals.

At this point, it bears recalling that the resolution of the mythical complex at work in *Iphigenie auf Tauris* was tied to reconceiving divinity in terms of truth. This unity of truth and

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[97] On the emergence of the empirical conception of light that Goethe is opposing here, see Michael Mandelartz, "Goethe, Newton und die Wissenschaftstheorie. Zu Wissenschaftskritik und Methodologie der *Farbenlehre*," in *Goethe, Kleist. Literatur, Politik und Wissenschaft um 1800* (Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag, 2011), 240–281.

[98] For a classic theological formulation of this point, see *S. Th.* I, q. 1 a. 7 & 12.

[99] FA II 6: 605; Schöne refers to this letter in the passage just cited.

the divine is explicitly thematized again in the late work *Versuch einer Witterungslehre*, there

with regard to the conditions under which such an identification can be thought:

> Das Wahre mit dem Göttlichen identisch läßt sich niemals von uns direkt erkennen,
> wir schauen es nur im Abglanz, im Beispiel, Symbol, in einzelnen und verwandten
> Erscheinungen; wir werden es gewahr als unbegreifliches Leben und können dem
> Wunsch nicht entsagen, es dennoch zu begreifen. Dieses gilt von allen Phänomenen
> der faßlichen Welt.[100]

The qualities listed in this passage describe the nature of our knowledge of such truth, a desire

for which ("Wunsch") is an inherent aspect of human nature. In addition to the familiar claim

that phenomena are grasped only through their effects, this passage presents two new elements.

First, truth is explicitly identified with the divine. While the exact nature of this identity is left

undetermined, describing truth in this way entails that expressing the nature of truth requires a

theologically informed conceptual apparatus. Second, the excerpt offers a formulation of *how* we

gain access to this only indirectly knowable domain of experience: "wir werden es gewahr als

unbegreifliches Leben." Becoming aware, incomprehensibility, and "life": these three

components describe both the activity and the content of our knowledge of "truth." This takes us

a step beyond the formulations that we have already seen. In addition to the negative assertion

that truth cannot be known in the mode of immediate insight, this passage offers us a

characterization of the mode under which truth as such manifests itself to us: not through a

judgment or some other direct grasping of an object, but through a dawning awareness of a

dimension of experience that eludes conceptual expression. The fact that such awareness is

meant to describe a form of positive knowledge—as opposed to a strictly negative insight into

the limitations of our rational capacities—is signified by Goethe's use of the expression

"unbegreifliches Leben." The word "Leben" is ambiguous, but it still provides a set of

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[100] FA I 25: 274.

sufficiently determinate associations to prevent the notion of unknowability from collapsing into an empty signifier. The term is invoked to emphasize that the kind of incomprehensibility at stake in this passage is not a breakdown in knowing, but rather a distinctive kind of knowledge, knowledge that corresponds to its object precisely by escaping forms of predicating judgment.

It is by bringing the epistemic category of incomprehensibility into relation with the hermeneutic framework discussed earlier that it becomes possible to specify the conception of rational finitude developed in the *Farbenlehre*. The key feature of this notion is that knowledge is not exhausted by the endless finite perspectives that we can bring to bear on an object. What these passages suggest is that this hermeneutic situation can itself become an object of knowledge, an object that we grasp as the inherent finitude of conceptuality itself. This, I take it, is the thought expressed in the following aphorism:

> Das ist die wahre Symbolik, wo das Besondere das Allgemeinere repräsentiert, nicht als Traum und Schatten, sondern als lebendig augenblickliche Offenbarung des Unerforschlichen.[101]

Now, Goethe's theory of the symbol is an immense topic, and I do not intend to summarize it here. For my purposes, the significance of this aphorism lies in its articulation of what one might call a phenomenology of the symbol. In such an instance of knowing, a pedestrian phenomenon ("das Besondere") serves as the occasion for perceiving the general type of which it is an instance ("das Allgemeinere"). The distinctively Goethean element here is that "das Allgemeine" does not merely stand for the universal of which this individual is an instance. Instead, what is perceived in such conditions is a "lebendig augenblickliche Offenbarung des Unerforschlichen," a domain that is unavailable to human knowledge and yet, in this unique instance, becomes available through a moment of "*Offenbarung*." The conditions under which the individual is

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[101] FA I 22: 208-209.

known, conditions that are usually hidden, come to be perceived *in their very hiddenness*. The

finitude of human knowledge becomes an object of knowing in a way that can only be described

as the revelation of the unknowable.

This leads me to an important qualification concerning the finitude of human knowledge.

The fact that knowledge exhibits this mediated structure does not reflect an epistemic deficiency,

as if there were a better form of knowledge to which we have no access. The claim is not about

the limitations of human capacities, but the form of knowing adequate to the kind of object in

question. That this is so plays a significant role in Goethe's earliest engagement with these

epistemological issues, an unpublished fragment that has come to be known as the "Studie nach

Spinoza." This essay begins by asserting that "Das Unendliche…kann von uns nicht gedacht

werden,"[102] and proceeds to develop an extended reflection on the consequences of such rational

limitation. The fragment concludes, however, by introducing the possibility that such a limitation

on human knowledge might be understood as something other than a simple defect:

> Nun möchten wir zwar nach unsrer Art zu denken diese Beschränkung keine Gabe
> nennen weil ein Mangel nicht als eine Gabe angesehen werden kann wohl aber
> möchten wir es als eine Gnade der Natur ansehen daß sie da der Mensch nur meist
> zu unvollständigen Begriffen zu gelangen imstande ist sie [sic] ihn doch mit einer
> solchen Zufriedenheit seiner Enge versorgt hat.[103]

This passage entertains two conceptions of finitude: finitude as (mere) *Mangel* and finitude as

Gabe/Gnade. Although we are naturally inclined ("nach unsrer Art zu denken") toward the

former, such a view is mistaken. In fact, nature has contrived it so that human beings find

contentment in their finitude. The limitations of knowledge explored in the essay are not

experienced in the first instance as a lack; they come to be perceived this way only after

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[102] FA I 25: 14.

[103] FA I 25: 17. My citation follows the punctuation of this edition, which omits the usual commas between subordinate clauses.

philosophical reflection has estranged us from our naïve satisfaction in finite existence, and it is to this satisfaction that the short essay directs its reader to return. That we should experience contentment instead of existential anxiety when faced with our finitude implies that constraint, defect, and lack are all misleading characterizations when it comes to describing our rational limitations. Goethe's suggestion is that finitude need not be conceived as a lamentable shortcoming, but rather as a genuine mode of knowledge, a form of distinctly human engagement with the world. It is not a defective stand-in for some unknowable "real" world, but the mode of encounter with the only world that is there to be known. This is where Goethe's thought parts ways most decisively with the project of his Idealist contemporaries: the paradigmatic instance of human knowledge occurs when thought grasps its own essential finitude, its inability to account for its own conditions and nature.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

It is significant that the term *Gestalt* has not appeared at any critical juncture in my analysis of either Goethe's scientific writings or his poetic works. As I have tried to show in the first three chapters, however, it is not the presence or absence of *Gestalt* as a technical term, but rather philosophical commitments with respect to rational finitude that form the center of debates surrounding divine revelation in the late 18th century. In this respect, Goethe's articulation of a finite notion of reason represents both an extended engagement with the central philosophical theme of German Idealism and a sensitivity to the religious implications of the Idealist project. It because of this divergence from his Idealist contemporaries that "Offenbarung" is a recurring image in Goethe's work. His use of this term is, of course, above all a metaphor to describe aspects of the relation between mind and world—it does not have an inherently religious value. Nevertheless, it is telling that, even as metaphors, revelation and its cognates play an essential

role in describing this relation when reason is viewed as essentially finite. These or similar metaphors become indispensable for a philosophical account in which rational activity is dependent on a kind of antecedent disclosure that cannot be rendered transparent through a philosophical method that is conceived as an exercise in discursive reason. Goethe's theorization of finitude, especially in light of its coordination with the Idealist notion of a self-legislating, autonomous reason, makes his thought an object of enduring theological relevance with respect to both the presuppositions of certain forms of theology as well as function of religious language in philosophical inquiry. Von Balthasar is certainly right to recognize this, even if his association of Goethe with a technical notion of *Gestalt* is tendentious at best.[104]

This leads me back to where I began, the question of how a secular philosophical position could come to bear on theological reflection. Goethe's conception of rational finitude closely aligns with the sort presumed by Christian theology which I developed in Chapter Two. Goethe is no Christian, however, at least in any traditional understanding of that term, and he cannot avail himself of the theological framework of human existence proposed by von Balthasar. The Christian vocabulary that I have been tracing is deployed outside of any confessional religious context, playing instead a metaphorical explanatory role required by the unique challenges involved in conceptualizing the limitations of reason. Although Goethe's theorization of finitude approximates its Christian philosophical equivalent, that is, this fact alone brings his thought no closer to the theological concept of divine revelation. And, if I have been correct in emphasizing that it is essential to revelation that its content cannot be philosophically derived, this should not

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[104] Of course, while Goethe may not attribute to this term the significance that von Balthasar does, he is not the only thinker 20th-century thinker to adopt *Gestalt* as a term of art in a moment of self-proclaimed Goethean inspiration. It was especially prominent in the biological sciences after being introduced as a technical term by Jakob Johann von Uexküll and Hans Driesch. See Frederick Amrine, "The Metamorphosis of the Scientist," *Goethe Yearbook* 5 (1990): 187–212; and Frederick Amrine, "The Music of the Organism: Uexküll, Merleau-Ponty, Zuckerkandl, and Deleuze as Goethean Ecologists in Search of a New Paradigm," *Goethe Yearbook* 22 (2015): 45–72.

be surprising. But it should also not be surprising, given the intimate link between revelation and rational finitude, that von Balthasar should find Goethe's thought to be theologically relevant. Goethe's robust notion of the limitations of reason explains why he frequently appears as one of von Balthasar's central philosophical references. What von Balthasar praises in Goethe is his theorization of what he calls here the transcendent dimension of human existence: the discovery that it depends on conditions that are unavailable to discursive thought. This is the conception of reason that Kant and his successors had systematically rejected, and the presupposition of divine revelation that he believed to be central to the Christian theological project in the wake of German Idealism:

> Es wäre möglich, diese wahre und eigentliche Transzendenz in einem tief genug gefaßten Begriff der Freiheit bereits nachzuweisen, auch wenn philosophisch davon nicht *mehr* ansichtig werden kann als jenes rätselvolle Offenbleiben an der Grenze, wie Goethes "Elpis" es verwirklichte.[105]

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[105] Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Persönlichkeit und Form," *Gloria dei. Christliche Zeitenwende. Zeitschrift für Theologie und Geistesleben* 7, no. 1 (1952): 1–15, here 9.

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