

Discipleship as Theological Prolegomenon

Implications for the Relation of Theory and Praxis in the Work of Pascal, Kierkegaard, and Bonhoeffer

by

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Declaration

By submitting this thesis, I declare that the entirety of the work contained therein is my own, original work, that I am the authorship owner thereof (unless to the extent explicitly otherwise stated) and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it for obtaining any qualification.

Signed: Patrick Dunn

Date: 08 November 2017

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Abstract

Theologians in South Africa have long wrestled with how the work and activity of Christians should stand in relation to the articles of Christian belief. The hope is that a theological theory more responsive to the prophetic praxis of the church's mission might save theology from the manipulative influences of oppressive agendas. The opposing concern, however, is also about ideological influences—that theology beholden to praxis can equally find itself governed by agendas divorced from the self-disclosure of God. In this respect, both the radical theologian and the traditional theologian presume an anthropology in which thought is prior to action, and principles are worked out in order to guide praxis. This thesis investigates whether this needs to be the case. It sets out to explore how the notion of discipleship offers—from within the Christian tradition—a way of understanding God's self-disclosure in activity. The priority of discipleship yields a different assumption, that action is the medium of God's revelatory self-disclosure, the transcendence both within and beyond human concretion. Three Christian thinkers interested in the philosophical, theological, and epistemic implications of discipleship will be considered—Blaise Pascal, Søren Kierkegaard, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Taken together, these three exemplify not only a critique of rationalism, but a critique of language as the medium of divine revelation. The Incarnation suggests that lived human existence is the medium for knowledge of God, and the discipleship of Christ is the space in which human particularity finds itself reconciled with divine life. The implication of their insights revises the criteria by which the truthfulness of theological language ought to be judged. Rather than being pre-determined by the primacy of autonomous notions of either theory or praxis, true theology arises from the prior unity of universal and particular in the space of discipleship. After exploring the origins of this insight in the work of Pascal, Kierkegaard, and Bonhoeffer in chapters two, three, and four, a fifth chapter considers contemporary debates about embodiment as a case study for this claim. Finally, as conclusion, a sixth chapter weighs the implications for theological language after discipleship in its relation to 20th-century Catholic and Protestant debates about the relation of divine and human thought in light of the Incarnation.

Opsomming

Die vraag oor hoe Christene se werk en wandel met die Christelike geloofsartikels in verhouding behoort te staan, het van vroeg af vir teoloë in Suid-Afrika besig gehou. Die hoop in hierdie diskoers is dat 'n teologiese teorie wat vanuit die profetiese praxis van die kerk se missionêre roeping ontspring die teologie kan beskerm teen die manipulerende invloede van benouende ideologieë. Die teenoorgestelde kommernis het egter soortgelyks te make met die invloed van ideologie, naamlik, dat 'n praxis-gerigte teologie ewe veel onder die heerskappy van agendas kan beland wat teen die selfbekendmaking van God indruis. So veronderstel sowel die 'radikale' teoloog as die 'tradisionele' teoloog 'n antropologie waarin denke aksies voorafgaan en beginsels vooraf uitgewerk word om aan praxis leiding te gee. Hierdie tesis stel die vraag of dit noodwendig die geval hoef te wees. Die vertrekpunt is 'n verkenning van hoe die begrip 'dissipelskap' as 'n manier kan dien om – vanuit die Christelike tradisie – God se selfopenbaring in terme van 'aktiwiteit' te verstaan. Die vooropstelling van dissipelskap kan potensieel 'n ánder veronderstelling teweegbring – dat God se openbarende selfbekendmaking deur *aksie* bemiddel word as die transendensie wat menslike beliggaming sowel *bewoon* as *oorstyg*. Drie Christelike denkers word oorweeg wat elkeen 'n besondere belangstelling toon vir die filosofiese, teologiese en epistemiese gevolge van dissipelskap: Blaise Pascal, Søren Kierkegaard en Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Tesame beskou bied hierdie drie denkers nie alleenlik 'n kritiek op rasionalisme aan nie, maar op taal as die medium van goddelike openbaring as sodanig. Die Vleeswording suggereer dat geleefde menslike bestaan die medium vir kennis van God is, en dat volgelingskap van Christus die ruimte is waar menslike partikulariteit binne die lewe van die Godheid versoen word. Die implikasie van hierdie denkers se insigte lei tot die hersiening van die kriteria vir die beoordeling van die waaragtigheid van teologiese taal. Eerder as wat die primaat van outonome konsepte van teorie of praxis voorafbepaal is, ontspring adekwate teologie vanuit die vooraf-gegewe eenheid van die universele en die partikuliere binne die ruimte van dissipelskap. Nadat hierdie insigte in die werk van Pascal, Kierkegaard, en Bonhoeffer in onderskeidelik hoofstukke twee, drie, en vier aan die orde gestel is, bied hoofstuk 5 'n bespreking van die huidige debatte rakende beliggaming as 'n gevallestudie vir hierdie kern-aanspraak. Ten slotte ondersoek hoofstuk ses die implikasies vir teologiese taal “na dissipelskap” in verhouding tot 20ste eeuse Rooms-Katolieke en Protestantse debatte rakende die verhouding tussen goddelike en menslike denke in die lig van die Vleeswording.

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Abbreviations

Blaise Pascal Complete Works

- POC 1 *Oeuvres complètes, tome I*
POC 2 *Oeuvres complètes, tome II*

Kierkegaard's Writings

- KW 2 *The Concept of Irony, with Continual Reference to Socrates*
KW 4 *Either/Or, Part II*
KW 6 *Fear and Trembling / Repetition*
KW 7 *Philosophical Fragments, or a Fragment of Philosophy*
KW 12.1 *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments, Volume I*
KW 15 *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*
KW 17 *Christian Discourses: The Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress*
KW 21 *For Self-Examination / Judge For Yourself!*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works

- DBWE 4 *Discipleship*
DBWE 6 *Ethics*
DBWE 8 *Letters and Papers from Prison*
DBWE 11 *Ecumenical, Academic, and Pastoral Work: 1931-1932*
DBWE 12 *Berlin: 1933*
DBWE 13 *London: 1933-1935*
DBWE 14 *Theological Education at Finkenwalde: 1935-1937*
DBWE 15 *Theological Education Underground: 1937-1940*
DBWE 16 *Conspiracy and Imprisonment: 1940-1945*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke

- DBW 4 *Nachfolge*
DBW 6 *Ethik*
DBW 12 *Berlin 1932-1933*
DBW 15 *Illegale Theologenausbildung Sammelvikariate 1937-1940*

Chapter 1

Theory, Praxis, Revelation and the Problem of Ideology

1.1 Introduction

Theology arising from the Global South has complicated traditional notions of the relationship between theory and praxis. South African theologians in particular frequently wrestle with the question of how theological ‘theory’ can be made more responsive to theological ‘praxis’. As a provisional definition, the ‘theory’ behind theology refers to language about God, and consequently the set of beliefs and confessions traditionally held by Christian theologians and proclaimed in Christian churches. ‘Praxis’ refers to the contextual manifestations of Christian faith intended to address particular circumstances—whether they be social, political, economic, ethical, or spiritual. Given these two definitions, what would it mean to make theory more responsive to praxis? Potentially, this means contextualizing the language and presentation of theology to address a particular audience. Or, secondly, it could mean a kind of mutual edification occurring between the pressing needs of the people and the language of orthodoxy, with theological language critically re-examining its own assumptions in light of the circumstances on the ground, and praxis being shaped by possibilities and provocations arising from within the theological language. Or, thirdly, it could mean that theological theory should be entirely shaped by praxis, surrendering or even renouncing its traditional shape to conform to the demands of reality.

Many South African theologians operate in this second mode, in the hope that theory and praxis can carry out a productive and transformative conversation. Various proposals have been made as to how theology might be re-thought in its relation to the “prophetic mission praxis” of the

South African church.¹ Klippiess Kritzinger has proposed “the integration of a justice-seeking praxis into the Sunday liturgy.”² Vuyani Vellem has made a kind of geographical proposal, that theological language will be properly integrated with praxis when it arises from “the township” as “the place of liberation and the total destruction of the colonial system and its culture.”³ Edward Wimberly has proposed a model borrowed from interracial church dialogues in America, which he calls “the forum-ing model of public discourse.”⁴ This model depends on “the notion that God is a participant in the conversation. God’s participation is to draw each participant into God’s significant ongoing liberation and justice activity.”⁵ Russel Botman, in developing a theology of transformation, has implicitly proposed something quite close to the aim of this thesis. He has discussed discipleship as the intersection of theological concerns and liberative praxis. Christian discipleship is itself “an enactment of transformation with vast social implications”⁶ and also an indicator to theology of the potential for re-centering theory on “Jesus of Nazareth as the subject of history.”⁷ In each case, South African theologians are attempting to locate theological confession in the space of living out God’s deep interest in the particularity of the suffering and injustices faced by South Africans, especially among poor and marginalised communities.

The over-arching relation between theory and praxis in contemporary South African theology generally resembles what Stephan de Beer and Ignatius Swart have called a “praxis-agenda” that “will purposefully contribute to a synergy between theory and action.”⁸ This synergy looks like “the wisdoms of certain public and particularistic theologies” being “co-shaped by the ideas, visions, conceptualisations, methodological orientations and practical agendas that are

¹ Tobias M. Masuku, “Prophetic mission of faith communities during apartheid South Africa, 1948-1994: an agenda for a prophetic mission praxis in the democratic SA,” *Missionalia* 42, no. 3 (Nov. 2014): 165.

² J.N.J. Kritzinger, “Concrete spirituality,” *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 70, no. 3, Art. #2782 (2014): 2.

³ Vuyani S. Vellem, “The task of urban black public theology,” *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 70, no. 3, Art. #2728 (2014): 4.

⁴ Edward P. Wimberly, “Forum-ing: Signature practice for public theological discourse,” *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 70, no. 3, Art. #2728 (2014): 2.

⁵ Wimberly, “Forum-ing,” 2.

⁶ H. Russel Botman, “Discipleship as Transformation? Towards a Theology of Transformation” (PhD dissertation: University of the Western Cape, 1993): 233.

⁷ H. Russel Botman, “Discipleship and Practical Theology: The Case of South Africa,” *International Journal of Public Theology* 4 (2000): 209.

⁸ Stephan de Beer and Ignatius Swart, “Towards a fusion of horizons: Thematic contours for an urban public theology praxis-agenda in South Africa,” *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 70, no. 3, Art. #2812 (2014): 1.

emanating” from the needs and development of urban life.⁹ In more practical terms, this mutual shaping privileges:

an ever-deepening urban public theological praxis-agenda giving impetus to action-oriented, problem-solving and normatively inclined discourses ‘from below’ in which different actors from the urban grass roots – linked to local urban communities of different kinds, urban social movements and not least urban faith communities – will become primary interlocutors.¹⁰

The middle space of mutuality between theory and praxis thus appears as a theology attentive to the particulars of faith communities. For the theologian, this suggestion is helpful to the extent that it offers a new space in which we think about what we are doing when we theologise, but unhelpful if it creates an unreflective theologising—a pretension that one might be able to somehow move outside of the questions raised by theology and carry on a more ‘action-oriented’ and ‘problem-solving’ discussion for which theology is irrelevant.

This thesis begins from the perspective that South African theologians have largely been correct to seek out some kind of theological middle ground to mediate between theory and praxis. But this middle ground needs to be articulated, theologically, even as it may be lived with and practiced in congregations on a regular basis. This thesis proposes to re-investigate the original dilemma. Before we get to the question of how theory and praxis can be practically brought into conversation, what do we actually mean when we claim that theory and praxis can be integrated? What theological claims are entailed? What resources are already available from within the Christian tradition that can not only make better sense of this integration, but open new considerations for its practical implementation?

This thesis will consider the notion of Christian discipleship as a space in which the mutuality of theory and praxis meet in the divine life. It is perhaps more obvious that Christian discipleship makes particular claims on praxis—it demands, for instance, that disciples pursue the imitation of Christ in self-giving love, transformative justice, and peace-making. But it is not necessarily self-evident how Christian discipleship makes claims on theological theory. The

⁹ De Beer and Swart, “Towards a fusion,” 1.

¹⁰ De Beer and Swart, “Towards a fusion,” 1.

inquiry proposed here is about how Christian discipleship might ground particular epistemic claims that then orient us in respect to the truth of Christian confession. In the words of the Latin American liberation theologian, Luis Pedraja, “The act of knowing and the object of knowing are not necessarily the same.”¹¹ That is a complex and multi-layered statement, but this thesis will take up the challenge of thinking through how the particular act of knowing contained within Christian discipleship might actually create the conditions for knowing the object of theology that is the living God.

1.2 Problem Statement

Before formulating the problem statement, let us consider two seemingly contrary options for addressing the relation of theological theory and praxis. As the previous section implied, in the South African context, much of the motivation for taking up the question in the first place has come from voices sympathetic to (or at least in conversation with) liberation theology. This section will consider a representative approach to theory and praxis in the work of the liberation theologian, Clodovis Boff, and contrast that with the sympathetic but critical response of John Milbank, a theologian more indebted to a classical ‘theoretical’ notion of orthodoxy.

The sympathies between the two lie in their shared concern about ideology, about the possibility that humans could conform their behavior to a set of beliefs divorced from fact and bent to serve the purposes of some powerful or selfish agenda. This concern is most acutely (but not exclusively) raised in the history of Marxist thought. In that tradition, Raymond Williams has identified three versions of a definition of ideology:

- (1) a system of beliefs characteristic of a particular class or group;
- (2) a system of illusory beliefs—false ideas or false consciousness—which can be contrasted with true or scientific knowledge;
- (3) the general process of the production of meanings and ideas.¹²

¹¹ Luis G. Pedraja, “And the Truth Shall Set You Free: Liberation Theology, Praxis, and Colonization,” *Apuntes* 25, no. 3 (Summer 2008): 44.

¹² Raymond Williams, “Ideology,” in *Ideology*, ed. Terry Eagleton (London: Longman, 1994): 175-189, on p. 175.

When this thesis uses the word ‘ideology’, it does so in Williams’ third sense, as the most general description of a system of meanings and ideas. But we should also acknowledge—as we shall see for both Boff and Milbank—the merits of Williams’ second sense, that ideology is a problem which needs to be addressed insofar as it obscures the truth. Theologically, we might say that the serpent’s promise, “you will not die,”¹³ is the first imposition of ideology onto the truth of God. In what way and to what extent ideology might obscure the truth are questions to be answered over the course of this thesis. Suffice to say for now that the general motivation for seeking a theology more responsive to praxis is also to seek a theology less influenced by the temptations of ideology, less capable of obscuring God via human manipulation at any level, from the personal to the societal.¹⁴

Boff’s most comprehensive treatment of the relation between theory, praxis, theology, and ideology is his 1978 book, *Teologia e Prática*. As he points out, liberation theology has been, to a certain extent, dismissive of or even antagonistic towards attempts to make sense of its own method, more content to be ‘doing’ theology than thinking about theology. For much liberation thought, “simply proposing the theses of liberation theology . . . took the place of a methodology.”¹⁵ While Boff attempts to refine the implicit background assumptions of liberation thought—to describe a “method of the method”¹⁶—he understandably cannot extricate himself entirely from the practice in which liberation theology is already engaged. There is always at least a small but inescapable degree of contradiction in liberation theologians attempting a meta-reflection, precisely because they are attempting to subvert ideological meta-narratives with the particularity of liberative action. More specifically, despite the title of the book, Boff willingly admits that he is not attempting to describe theology’s relation to praxis broadly, but to the form of liberative political action responsive to theology which takes place within “the

¹³ Gen. 3:4. Unless otherwise indicated, all scriptural references in this thesis are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

¹⁴ We should acknowledge in this definition of ideology and in the critique which will emerge here that ideology bears a distinct but interwoven relation to German Idealism. In a sense, both ideology as a subjectivist master narrative and its critique find their origin in different streams of Idealist thought. One might say, following the typology of Frederick Beiser, that ideology finds its origin in a subjectivist interpretation of Kant—in which any knowledge of the world beyond appearances is suspect—and that the critique of ideology finds its origin in an objectivist interpretation—in which appearances are one form of the manifestation of an Absolute, of the very structure of reality. For more, see Frederick C. Beiser, *German Idealism: The Struggle Against Subjectivism, 1781-1801* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2002), 17ff. It lies beyond the scope of this thesis to take up more fully the complexities of the relation between ideology and idealism, but this relation will return indirectly in chapter 5, as a question looming in the background of critical theories of embodiment.

¹⁵ Clodovis Boff, *Theology and Praxis: Epistemological Foundations*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1987), xxii.

¹⁶ Boff, *Theology and Praxis*, xxvi.

de facto milieu” of a general notion of praxis.¹⁷ This is an important context, then, for Boff’s claim that, “Liberation theology considers praxis as the fundamental locus of theology, the ‘place’ where theology occurs.”¹⁸ Liberation thought, while it may receive its motivation and hope for liberation from theology, receives its definition of the real from some other source, some science more capable of describing—as Adolphe Gesché writes in introducing Boff’s work—the “political, profane, truly ‘earthly’ reality.”¹⁹ Consequently, the first third of Boff’s book is devoted to explaining the grounds on which theology could be integrated with the social sciences, as “the disciplines whose formal object is the nature of [political] tasks and practices.”²⁰

This is an important point for our purposes. Boff does not take ‘theology’ at any point to represent a meta-paradigmatic frame which could give meaning not only to political theory, but to praxis generally and even to a basic understanding of reality. The “epistemological position” of the liberation theologians “is that liberation is a kind of ‘horizon,’ against which the whole tradition of the faith is to be read.”²¹ The nature and path to this horizon may be illuminated by all kinds of thought—Christian or not, theological or not, religious or not. Consequently, Boff sees theologising itself as one (perhaps momentary) social artifact in the broader dialectical thrust of history, and thus opposes “the ideology of ‘epistemological consensualism’ that canonizes the theoretical practice of a group.”²² Theology thus takes its marching orders, in a sense, from the demands placed upon it by a strategic socio-economic analysis of where present reality stands in relation to the envisioned horizon of liberation.

It is at this point where John Milbank is most forceful in his own critique, while remaining sympathetic to the political agenda of the liberation theologians. Milbank argues that liberation theology’s claims entail an entire schema of theological commitments to which it is simply unwilling to admit. The Catholic liberationists who are Milbank’s principle foil work—whether

¹⁷ Boff, *Theology and Praxis*, xxiv.

¹⁸ Boff, *Theology and Praxis*, xxi.

¹⁹ Adolphe Gesché, “Foreword,” in Clodovis Boff, *Theology and Praxis: Epistemological Foundations*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1987), xiv.

²⁰ Boff, *Theology and Praxis*, 6. See also 20ff. for more.

²¹ Boff, *Theology and Praxis*, xxix.

²² Boff, *Theology and Praxis*, xxix.

they know it or not—within a much larger debate about theological “integralism.”²³ Integralism, in this case, refers to a longstanding Catholic debate on the nature-grace relation.²⁴ The common Catholic critique of the Reformers—as portrayed, for instance, by Hans Urs von Balthasar—was that they mistakenly read patristic thought and turned the “de facto” distance between God and humanity after the Fall into a “necessary” distance.²⁵ Fallenness thus became not a description of humanity’s current condition, but a description of the very nature of being human. Catholic theology has long sought to overcome this radical distance between divine and human by arguing instead that the very nature of created things retains a certain openness to future reconciliation with God even in its fallen state. This asymmetrical partnership between Creator and created opens up possibilities for a theological ‘integralism’ in which this relationship is explored. Much of 20th-century Catholic thought has thus been about the precise formulation of the integration of the divine and human spheres.

In Milbank's reading, the presuppositions of liberation theology implicitly place it within a form of integralism whose most articulate 20th-century ambassador is Karl Rahner.²⁶ Milbank prefers an alternative—a form of integralism manifest in the *nouvelle théologie*. The distinction between the two is that the former integrates the divine and human spheres in such a way as to “naturalize the supernatural,” while the latter “supernaturalizes the natural.”²⁷ While Milbank admits the crudeness of this caricature, it nonetheless gets at his basic concern that the liberation theologians assume “that to take account of the social is to take account of a factor essentially ‘outside’ the Church and the basic concerns of theology.”²⁸ Milbank’s concern is precisely about Boff’s admission that praxis forms a sphere of human reality more expansive than the particular political actions with which theology is concerned (in the liberation account). There is an integration of divine and human in liberation thought, but this integration is accomplished by essentially locating theology as one player on a larger stage of human drama. Milbank’s preference is that a Christian understanding of humanity’s ontological openness to God would provide the over-arching construct within which praxis, politics, and social analysis would take their proper place. His form of integralism thus also intends to narrow the distance

²³ John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 207.

²⁴ For more on the nature-grace distinction in contemporary Catholic theology, see section 6.4, below.

²⁵ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth: Exposition and Interpretation*, trans. Edward Oakes (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 271.

²⁶ Milbank, *Social Theory*, 207.

²⁷ Milbank, *Social Theory*, 207.

²⁸ Milbank, *Social Theory*, 208.

between the divine and human spheres, but by essentially sweeping the supposedly autonomous social logic of praxis into the supervening logic of the Church.

It may well be the case that Milbank's account merely serves to protect the priority of magisterial theology's status, and thus the Church's status. But there is at least a kernel of substance to his critique. That substance lies in the notion of ideology. In its most simplistic form, the dispute between Milbank and Boff amounts to the hurling of accusations and counter-accusations that the opposing side has subordinated Christian faithfulness to a pre-existing ideology. Boff readily admits the influence on his own thought of Louis Althusser's early work on ideology.²⁹ From within the stream of Marxist debate, Althusser principally conceives of ideology in terms of the overbearing state creating social "apparatuses" to re-produce in each generation of its citizens a submissiveness to capitalist logic.³⁰ Thus, for Boff, ideology (or at least harmful ideologies) can only be identified in their relation to powerful institutions and structures. This is what makes it seem, from a liberationist vantage, that Milbank's integralism is mere ideology masquerading as theology.

But the substance of Milbank's critique is to question whether we fully understand the insidiousness of ideologies serving hegemonic interests. The version of mid-20th century Marxism with which liberationism has often partnered was overly credulous about the possibilities of an objective, materialist, social scientific assessment of oppressive structures. This credulity was its own kind of ideology, a relic from a period of Leninist rhetoric in which it was hoped that an intellectual vanguard could unfetter the masses from the dominion of false consciousness. From the perspective of the 21st-century, however, it simply will not do to presuppose "that socialism is simply the inevitable creed of all sane, rational human beings."³¹ It should be obvious by now that even 'objective,' 'materialist' assessments of reality are easily folded into the objectives of oppressive structures. In the era of Big Data, economic models driving deregulation, and trans-national brands racing each other to 'capture' emerging markets, it often seems that the 'science' of social science is even more thoroughly ideological than was previously recognized.

²⁹ See Boff, *Theology and Praxis*, 35ff.

³⁰ Louis Althusser, "Idéologie et appareils idéologiques d'État (Notes pour une recherche)" in *Positions: 1964-1975* (Paris: Les Éditions sociales, 1976), 67-125.

³¹ Milbank, *Social Theory*, 208.

In many ways, South Africa has become the perfect case study for Milbank's critique. The thrill of the ANC's ascent to power in democratic South Africa was also the thrill—for some, at least—of having finally established a 'revolutionary state.' In theory, at that moment South Africa joined a litany of revolutions in which state power ostensibly becomes the means for protecting and disseminating an ongoing 'counter-ideology' which opposes the larger reactionary forces attempting to topple it. Sadly, however, in the South African case (as in others) it seems that the 'counter-ideology' has served powerful self-interests equally as well as its older counterpart. The last twenty years have created an incongruous situation in which some of the staunchest opponents of the ANC-led state arise from white-dominated capital, and the supposed subversives of the Tripartite Alliance find themselves opposing capital's exploitation by propping up the ideology of the state's reckless and corrupt use of power. Ideology may indeed serve power, but the real force of Milbank's critique is the reminder that it is perpetually difficult to isolate and identify all the loci of power afflicting the human condition. As such, it is harder than we dare admit to know—at a given moment—whether or not one is serving as an accidental ideologue. The hope—which Christian theology may provide—is to construct an account of knowledge truly able to subvert this possibility at every turn.

Milbank's preference for the integralism of the *nouvelle théologie* is due to his conviction that in its ontology it finally and "truly abandons hierarchies and geographies in theological anthropology."³² Ideologies serving human powers are only usurped once human ontology is graciously flattened by the approach of the divine into its own nature. Without consenting to this conviction or necessarily agreeing with much of Milbank's work, this thesis begins with a presumption that there is a rough hint here of a useful strategy. Perhaps a theological investigation into the reality of God's self-revelation towards humanity can disclose an entirely new grounds on which to relate theory and praxis.

Finally, we can provide a clearer problem statement for this thesis: Both radical and orthodox theological models for relating theory and praxis struggle to articulate a self-understanding that cannot itself be captured by ideology. They struggle with this articulation because they struggle to conceive of theology's *métier* as anything other than ideation. Read through the metaphors of cognition, theology is perpetually beholden to its relation to a web of other '-ologies' in which it can be ensnared by power, oppression, and manipulation. But this is a problem for the

³² Milbank, *Social Theory*, 208.

Christian theologian, who strives to articulate a language about the God who stands starkly opposed to the self-serving masters of ideology.

1.3 Research Questions

Despite their differences, the perspectives Boff and Milbank represent—a praxis-oriented radical theology on the one hand and a theory-oriented traditional orthodoxy on the other—share an assumption about the nature of praxis. It is easy to assume that theory and praxis belong on a broader spectrum of various binaries about which we already speak without sufficient clarity. The distinction between theory and praxis becomes akin to the distinction between grace and nature, or transcendence and immanence, or the sacred and the secular, or faith and science, or the sphere of God’s revelation and the sphere of human affairs. Theory belongs to the abstract, and thus belongs alongside a regnant theology, a pre-modern era of the church’s thought in isolation. Praxis belongs to concretion, and thus to the world as we now ‘know’ it to be in modernity, to the era of a pluralistic cooperation addressing the challenges facing a common humanity considered more universal than our various religious commitments.

The shared assumption is that praxis is a fundamentally immanent endeavor, and that it therefore belongs at the ‘human’ end of the spectrum. As a result, there is little to distinguish between the realm of human-generated rationality and the realm of praxis itself. For Boff, praxis is human activity according to the best recommendations of the social sciences. If theology “finds its point of departure, its milieu and its finality in praxis,”³³ then this also implies a subordination of theological thought to a more basic realm of rational thought. This concerns Milbank, because he questions whether this more basic realm is truly rational and not also unhelpfully ideological. But in re-elevating divine revelation above human thought, he also reduces praxis to a perpetually secondary role, an application which awaits the conclusion of theology’s “recovery of a pre-modern sense of the Christianized person as the fully real person.”³⁴ In other words, so long as praxis is the ‘human’ element of Christian faith, it is difficult in both cases to conceive of a way to privilege divine revelation over and above ideology without also thereby privileging theory over praxis.

³³ Boff, *Theology and Praxis*, xxi.

³⁴ Milbank, *Social Theory*, 207.

The research questions taken up in this work ask whether this needs to be the case. The primary research question is: *are there resources in the Christian tradition for the possibility that the disruptive force of God's revelation emerges in the medium of praxis rather than cognition?* Would a closer look at the form of revelation itself reveal a lived existence even before it defines an intellectual commitment?

A handful of secondary research questions emerge from this primary question which will guide this thesis:

- What is the relation of Christian discipleship to the form of God's revelation?
- What are the implications of considering discipleship as the mode in which Christians respond to God's self-disclosure?
- What consequences does Christian discipleship have for a broader notion of human reason?
- What are the problems and possibilities of a notion of Christian discipleship for uniquely responding to concerns about ideology?
- What is the relation between Christian discipleship and current theological and philosophical debates surrounding embodiment?
- What further questions would need to be addressed in order to make use of Christian discipleship as a theological prolegomenon?

1.4 Aims and Objectives

The central aim of this project is to develop an account of a theological method which contains in its own self-definition the resources for resisting the manipulating influences of ideology. This will also be referred to at points in this thesis as the attempt to develop a theological language which arises out of or follows after discipleship. In that sense, this thesis will frequently return to the notion of a 'theology after discipleship'. That phrase should be understood simultaneously in two senses at once. The aim here is to develop the basis for a theological language which pursues—*chases after*—concretion in the form of discipleship, and does so by also permitting itself to be secondary—to *come after* the priority of lived Christian existence.

A few objectives will be pursued along the way to accomplishing this aim:

- 1) To consider in what way the notion of discipleship confronts and undermines the totalising discourses of ideology.
- 2) To consider the relation of a theology which follows after discipleship to a traditional understanding of theology's role in relation to Christian praxis.
- 3) To consider whether there might still be room in a theology after discipleship to speak intelligibly about the 'knowledge of God' or 'the word of God' without opening up the potential to make such notions susceptible to ideology all over again.
- 4) To apply the implications of a theology after discipleship to the test case of the issues and challenges surrounding the language of embodiment.

1.5 Hypothesis

The hypothesis of this thesis begins with the hunch that within the Lutheran notion of God's activity *sub contrario*—i.e., under the aspect of God's opposite—there are resources for thinking about praxis as the subversion of ideology. Given the intense polemicism in which Luther defined *sola fide* and *sola gratia*, these resources are perhaps a bit blunted in Luther's own work. But a number of thinkers directly or indirectly influenced by a Lutheran ethos have more clearly registered the implications of a Christian notion of discipleship for the theological language which would follow after.

This thesis will examine more closely three exemplars of this perspective—two iconoclastic Lutherans and a Jansenist. These exemplars are the French mathematician Blaise Pascal, the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, and the German pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer. None of these three were properly systematic thinkers, but the assumption here is that their fragmentary particularism itself reveals part of their theological method. The hypothesis of this thesis is that an investigation into the claims of these three thinkers will reveal a notion of Christian discipleship that compels theological speech (along with the whole of a Christian's life) to draw its merit from the indistinguishability of theory and praxis in Christ. In each thinker, the acknowledgment that God's call to obedience refuses to differentiate between true thought and true action provides the grounds for a fresh understanding of the interaction between theory and praxis.

1.6 Methodology and Definitions

1.6.1 Engaged Systematics as Methodology

In one sense, this is a thesis about a methodological debate, and thus its own methodological commitments only properly emerge as the thesis unfolds. On the other hand, aware that “theological discourse always comes from somewhere, is spoken by someone, and is legitimated or delegitimated by some institution implicated in particular sets of social and cultural relations,”³⁵ it is important to consider what kind of approach backgrounds the current investigation. Methodologically, this thesis should be understood as an example of what Graham Ward has referred to as “an engaged systematics.”³⁶ As such, it concerns itself with “*lived doctrine*; *doctrina* as a verbal noun, the art of making something known.”³⁷ To the extent that a methodology concerns an observational vantage on the situation at hand, then this thesis presumes that the intersection of divine intent and human activity is both the object and the proper subject of theological investigation.

This thesis will thus consider the work of Pascal, Kierkegaard, and Bonhoeffer, as each represents an engaged thinker in his own right, attentive to the particularity of lived Christian existence and its implications for corresponding Christian thought. As a practical matter, this investigation will proceed by highlighting in each thinker a line of argumentation relevant to the current project. In that respect, this is neither a comprehensive theological nor historical reading of the work of Pascal, Kierkegaard, and Bonhoeffer. In isolation, none of the three fully depicts a portrait of theology after discipleship, and yet their interlocking concerns will allow us to build from one to the next.

In taking up this task, this thesis will make extensive use of the primary works authored by Pascal, Kierkegaard, and Bonhoeffer, while still bearing in mind the relevant interpretations of their work in the secondary literature. This method necessarily requires us to be somewhat selective in which aspects of their work we consider, but the hope is that some interaction with the secondary literature will keep us within reach of the broader debates about how the work of each thinker should be interpreted as a whole.

³⁵ Graham Ward, *How the Light Gets In: Ethical Life I* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2016), 116.

³⁶ Ward, *How the Light*, 119.

³⁷ Ward, *How the Light*, 119, emphasis in original.

Because of the integration of methodological concerns with the present argument, it will be of use to consider what is already assumed as the investigation begins. The title of this thesis mentions three concepts which will require substantial defining in order to be properly understood in their usage here. These concepts are ‘theology,’ ‘prolegomenon,’ and ‘discipleship.’ Each of these three words is used quite broadly in academic and ecclesial circles, but used quite specifically in this thesis, and so the rest of this section will take them up one by one and consider how the specific usage here contrasts with other, broader definitions.

1.6.2 Theology

During the 19th and 20th centuries, historical criticism, structuralist anthropology, and the associated rise of a non-confessional, ‘scientific’ study of religion have all caused Christian theology to take stock. The assumption of modernity by the mid-20th century was that Christian theology was self-evidently one token of a broader category of human religious thought. Taking this notion to heart, Christian theologians adopted two kinds of strategies for continuing to seek value and meaning in confessional thought forms.

The first strategy continued to define Christian theology as the particular discourse of a historical tradition, and thus embraced its locality on the larger humanist plane of religious thought. Christian theology was understood as one concretisation of “the patterns of production of meaning within a given cultural context”³⁸ more broadly. This opened up two possibilities. The first was that Christian theology—as it entered new cultural contexts—could find itself taken up by this new culture’s matrix of meanings, recast according to the modes of thought and praxis particular to that people. The second was that Christian theology could see itself as one contributor to an even larger, inter-religious dialogue within this broader field of humanity’s search for meaning. According to this strategy, the continued value of Christian confessionalism is its potential to contribute unique, human, contextually-situated perspectives to the inter-religious conversation.

The second strategy redefined Christian theology away from the narrower confines of its historical form and towards an interpretative form where its claims could be correlated with the very existence of this larger humanist plane. Here, the fruit of Christian theology was not

³⁸ Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1985), 4.

in its locality within a broader frame of reference, but its ability to articulate the shape of a universal human longing or a universal *telos* of nature. Abstracted from the details of particular confessions, the sweeping movement of Christian thought could still point to fundamental truths manifest in local religious claims. This kind of perspective is available, for instance, in Teilhard de Chardin's vision of "noogenesis ascending irreversibly towards Omega through the strictly limited cycle of a geogenesis."³⁹ Here, the continued value of Christian confessionalism is its potential to point past itself to deeper truths encompassing a broader perspective.

In the midst of this modernist moment, a third stream of theological discourse continued in its own historical self-understanding. Theology in this third mode neither denies that Christianity makes universal claims, nor seeks some even larger universality to which these specific claims might point. Instead, it seeks an understanding of universality entirely from within the particularity of Christian claims. Theology in this vein continues on its course because it takes the discourse of created humanity as a whole to be best understood within Christianity's confessional discourse about God.

For the purposes of this thesis, I simply take as given this third definition of Christian theology. I will take it as given in part because it remains the typical understanding of theology among contemporary Christian theologians of various stripes. In this third mode, theology is a linguistic enterprise insofar as it is "our speaking about the divine,"⁴⁰ our "discourse concerning revelation and faith."⁴¹ As such, it is language about God, formed "under the impact of God's self-revelation."⁴² Theology "takes as normative a story of response to God in the world and the world in God"⁴³ and is thus "grounded in and inseparable from God's self-revelation in Christ."⁴⁴ It cannot merely accommodate human language about God, but requires

³⁹ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*, trans. Bernard Wall (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008, originally published in 1955), 273.

⁴⁰ Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Transforming Vision: Explorations in Feminist The*logy* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2011), 3.

⁴¹ Rudolf Bultmann, *What is Theology?*, eds. Eberhard Jüngel and Klaus W. Müller, trans. Roy A. Harrisville (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997), 157.

⁴² Thomas F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1996), 9.

⁴³ Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, Felstead & Co., 2000), 7.

⁴⁴ Donald G. Bloesch, *A Theology of Word and Spirit: Authority and Method in Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 19.

“learning another language.”⁴⁵ It is thus a language which inevitably engages with the historical confessions of the church, precisely because there it finds a history of people attempting to ground their language in God. “Theology is the business of all God’s people”⁴⁶ and “the church’s response to the autobiographical impulse”⁴⁷ because it “is the church’s enterprise of thought”⁴⁸ and thus finds that its “liberty . . . consists in its bond to the church.”⁴⁹

In sum, this thesis presumes that theology is an inherently linguistic enterprise which responds to God’s self-disclosure and takes place in relation to a history of like-minded efforts. This is not to say that other fields of discourse and other non-linguistic representations are not important, or are not theological, or are not responsive to God. But they are not theology in the sense in which this thesis uses the term. Nor does this mean that the humanist concerns of the first two strategies are misguided or ill-intentioned. It is to say, however, that we will discover their best merits once an understanding of the conditions of modernity to which they intend to speak are also situated by reference to God’s self-disclosure.

Therefore, while it will be tempting to read this thesis’ argument as an attempt at theological deconstruction, that reading—while understandable—would be mistaken. The hypothesis taken up here is not an attempt to redefine the nature of theology, per se. It is an investigation into the nature of that which precedes theology, about the act of theologising, and then about what logic should drive theological reasoning on the basis of theologising’s origins in God. From a kind of taxonomical perspective, then, there is no requirement that what is meant here by ‘theology’ is fundamentally different than what ‘theology’ has always traditionally meant. Within the frame of this thesis’ argument, it will not do to reform theological reasoning by simply confusing or replacing theology with something else.

Therefore, while this thesis will argue that it is a mistake to consider thought to be prior to action, this mistake is not remedied by a casual reassertion that action should be prior to

⁴⁵ Stanley Hauerwas, *Working with Words: On Learning to Speak Christian* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 87.

⁴⁶ Jürgen Moltmann, *Experiences in Theology: Ways and Forms of Christian Theology*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), 11.

⁴⁷ James H. Evans, Jr., *We Have Been Believers: An African-American Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), 1.

⁴⁸ Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology, Volume I: The Triune God* (New York: Oxford UP, 1997), vii.

⁴⁹ Benedict XVI, *The Nature and Mission of Theology: Essays to Orient Theology in Today’s Debates*, trans. Adrian J. Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 46.

thought. And we will certainly confuse the issue if, as in the previous section, we are locked into the assumption that Christian ‘theory’ is the sphere in which God speaks and Christian ‘praxis’ is entirely worked out by humans within a reality that supersedes God’s reality. As best we can, we must set those assumptions to one side. This thesis is in search of the common origin of both theory and action in God’s self-disclosure. It will unpack an argument which starts not with a conviction about the primacy of praxis as we normally understand it, but with the conviction that Christian thought should be determined by the basic unity of divine will and human response that is the person of Christ.

With respect to the specific task of theology, as a traditioned linguistic enterprise, there is no requirement here that theology shift to an entirely different medium. The particular discourse of confessional theology does not necessarily need to become categorically other than what it is. Theological reasoning, however—meaning the process by which theology reaches its conclusions from its own premises—may need reassessing. And that may indeed require shifting some of traditional theology’s self-understanding if we take up this thesis’ notion of how ‘God talk’ arises out of a unity that is even more primary than the categories of thought and action which we take to be basic. In order to talk about the depth of this primacy, let us turn to a second term in the title of this thesis, ‘prolegomenon.’

1.6.3 Prolegomenon

The notion of a ‘prolegomenon’ experienced its heyday in the 17th and 18th centuries, in a post-Cartesian era in which many philosophers endeavoured “to rebuild philosophy from the ground up.”⁵⁰ These various prolegomena shared an interest in re-examining the first principles of thought. A preliminary definition of a prolegomenon, in this context, would be any effort to describe the grounds for thought. But, as we shall see, even that definition requires more careful nuance.

Descartes’ approach was, for a time, paradigmatic of the attempt to re-open the question of philosophy’s first principles.⁵¹ His 1641 *Meditationes de Prima Philosophia* sought a truly indisputable foundation from which thinking could build. The skeptical method he used there

⁵⁰ Gary Hatfield, “Introduction,” in Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics That Will Be Able to Come Forward as Science, with Selections from the Critique of Pure Reason*, rev. ed., ed. and trans. Gary Hatfield (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004): ix-xxxiv, on ix.

⁵¹ René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy with Selections from the Objections and Replies*, 2nd edition, ed. and trans. John Cottingham (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2017).

established that the first principle of thought must stand beyond the variety of errors and misjudgments to which thought is prone. For Descartes, only the knowledge of God's goodness could serve as the unconditioned guarantor of rational thought, the one thought which makes thought possible. In this sense, however, Descartes' meditations, and the work of many imitators thereafter, were more an act of prologue—a *pro-logos*, a mere first word introducing other words—than an act of prolegomena—a *pro-legein*, a word about that which comes before any speech at all. Descartes' ground for philosophy was a first thought, a first word about the goodness of God which could give us reason to trust our empirical apprehension of the world. From there, human reason could begin its work.

Of course, Descartes' first thought has always been susceptible to the charge of circularity. If the ground of thought is also a thought, how can it not be subject to all the same skepticism to which other thoughts are subject? Surmounting this problem would require an entirely different approach. No longer would a prologue suffice. What was required was a proper prolegomenon, an inquiry into the conditions which must hold in order to speak sensibly at all.

Kant provided an answer in the form of history's most famous prolegomenon, and perhaps the first prolegomenon to truly deserve the name. His 1783 *Prolegomena zu einer jeden künftigen Metaphysik*—along with his *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*—took up the task of investigating the conditions which must hold in order to form conceptions sensibly.⁵² Only this could properly be called a foundation for knowledge—a secure basis for establishing what can be said about the reality which lies prior to speaking. Rather than seeking a first thought or a foundation for thinking, Kant took thought itself as the object which could indirectly disclose its own grounds not by direct reference to these premises, but by revealing the transcendent conditions for its own formation. In doing so, Kant hoped to ground epistemology on something unreceived but still self-evidently available.

Without taking Kant's solution to be determinative, this thesis nonetheless takes Kant's question to be definitional for a proper notion of prolegomenon. What we are speaking about when

⁵² Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics and the Letter to Marcus Herz, February 1722*, 2nd edition, ed. and trans. James W. Ellington (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2001); Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason: Unified Edition*, ed. James W. Ellington, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1996).

we speak about a prolegomenon is that which must obtain in order for us to be speaking intelligibly about reality at all. A prolegomenon is not the first premise of thought, it is the condition necessary prior to any positing of premises at all.

Of course, try as one might, it is difficult to speak truly about the conditions for true speech without absurdity. For the last four hundred years, despite its readiness to criticise Descartes' solution, philosophy has not found many ways to do better. Any attempt to conceptualise the basis of all conceptions too easily finds itself spiraling quickly into an increasingly vicious circle. It was not a long drop from Kant to Fichte's insistence that only in the subjectivity of thought thinking itself could one find something resembling the *a priori*.⁵³ Prolegomena in the Kantian sense began to experience a long decline. Little was left in terms of a hope that metaphysics could find its science by examining thought, expecting that thought would reveal in its own form something as stable as the grounds of its own existing. Hegel turned the recurring instability of reflection on thought into its own kind of *a priori*, and Heidegger opened a window to clear the stale air only by setting to the side the epistemological question entirely, thus saving continental philosophy from another century of puzzling over it.⁵⁴ In the analytic sphere, the disciples of Frege hoped, for a time, that the structure of conceptions could at least yield its own unassailable internal logic, until Quine's naturalized epistemology turned the question from the form of knowledge to the process by which knowledge is obtained.⁵⁵

This brief history of post-Kantian philosophical prolegomena is somewhat distinct from where Christian theology currently stands, however. In large part, this is due to Karl Barth, who revived the possibility of a prolegomenon with a sharpness of insight that has not always been appreciated. Other modern Reformed dogmatists evade epistemological questions by simply asserting a presumption "that God exists . . . that He has revealed Himself in His divine Word"⁵⁶ and that the written scriptures are "the form of God's Word that is available for study, for public inspection, for repeated examination, and as a basis for mutual discussion."⁵⁷ It has been

⁵³ J.G. Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge*, ed. and trans. Peter Heath and John Lachs (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1982).

⁵⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996, originally published in 1953).

⁵⁵ W.V.O. Quine, "Epistemology Naturalized," in *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays* (New York: Columbia UP, 1969): 69-90.

⁵⁶ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 18.

⁵⁷ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 50.

too easy for many to assume that Barth does the same, simply replacing a fundamentalist notion of scripture as Word with the historical appearance of the Word in flesh. But Barth's thinking, fully aware of the Kantian problematic, is more nuanced than that.

Rather than asserting that Christ is merely the axiomatic first Word from which theology deduces, Barth's dogmatics is an inquiry into what reality must precede a church which confesses as the Christian church does, and then what kind of theology properly attests to this reality. Where Kant inquired into the *a priori* of thought which would give rise to thought as it is, Barth inquired into the *a priori* of God who would necessitate the church to confess as it does. The Christian confesses Jesus is Lord. What conditions would have to obtain in order for this confession to be true and intelligible as it stands? The Christian exists within a larger church which shares this confession. What conditions would have to obtain in order for this church to exist as it does? And how could one then build a dogmatics on the basis of these prior conditions?

Barth's approach has too often been mistakenly read under the broader rubric of a method, as one attempt among many to anchor reason in an irrefutable starting point. In my view, for instance, this is the weakness of Pannenberg's reading of Barth. Pannenberg understands this confessional focus as Barth giving priority to faith, and thus Barth undermining "the assumption that the reality of God is a presupposition for dogmatics from the very outset."⁵⁸ But significantly, Barth is not attempting to select one axiom to elevate above all others. He is rather asking about what must be true in order to create the sensible conditions for the particular array of axioms that is the Christian faith.

The common accusation of fideism against Barth fails to fully capture this nuance. His theology is not neo-Cartesian, but influenced by the neo-Kantians. It is not built, as others' might be, on a bare assertion of a first principle which must be accepted by faith in order for theological language to cohere. It is rather built on the basis of an already existing church proclaiming Jesus as its Lord and Savior, inquiring into what must be true of the God who would bring this state of affairs—in all its particularity—into being. *Kerygma*, church, and the being of Christ himself all testify to an *actus purus*, to an "action which is self-originating and which is to be understood in terms of itself," and thus is also "a free action and not a constantly available

⁵⁸ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology, Volume I*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 45.

connexion.”⁵⁹ To the extent that Barth appears as a fideist, it is only because he justifiably acknowledges that the nature of the Christian proclamation includes a confession of its own ability to interpret itself from within itself. The whole of Barth’s theology responds to the particularity of a God whose pure act would call into being this confessing church as we know it. Barth’s prolegomenal work thus also justly bears the name. It is not a first word for a theology which follows after, but the attempt to dig into the reality which makes the theological thought of the Christian church possible.

Whether Barth succeeds or not, the nature of his theological prolegomenon is instructive for this thesis. It is quite possible that Barth’s thought trends towards the same kind of collapse into Fichtean subjectivity as Kant’s and that some who have called themselves Barthians are the best example of this playing itself out in a “positivism of revelation,” in Bonhoeffer’s famous phrase.⁶⁰ We will consider in section 6.3 the possibilities for further research along this thesis’ line of inquiry which might yield an appreciative critique of Barth. Suffice to say for now that the main thrust of this thesis takes seriously that Barth’s approach is at least structurally sensible. If it collapses towards a theological Fichteanism, it is only because Barth assumed that the *actus purus* observed in the church best corresponded to a linguistic structure resolved in cognition, and thus was always at pains to explain the concept of revelation prior to conceptuality. The hypothesis here is that the thicket of problems which the later Barth attempted to extricate himself from by way of the *analogia fidei* was created by permitting the linguistic structure of *kerygma*—manifest simultaneously in the nature of confession, the being of the proclaiming church, and Christ as Word—to serve as the guiding metaphor for the transcendental *a priori* of Christian theology.

This thesis will thus be exploring the potential of discipleship to serve as the phenomenon in which the Barthian question can be approached without the risk of falling into circularity. If the risk of circularity is always present so long as we are speaking about speech, or thinking about thought, what different mode of reasoning arises from the Christian notion of discipleship? Perhaps a different grounding for theology would arise from an even closer attentiveness to what is entailed in the church’s confession, namely, something extra-linguistic, that the

⁵⁹ Karl Barth, *The Church Dogmatics, Volume I/1*, eds. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, trans. G.W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975), 41.

⁶⁰ *DBWE* 8, 364.

church *confesses*, and that this confessing is always a happening related in every direction at once to a full life lived in relation to God.

This full life is discipleship. It is in this sense that discipleship is taken up here as a prolegomenon to theology. What can we say about the God who commands the particularity of a holistic obedience in which confession is a part, i.e. the life of the disciple? What kind of theology responds to this God? What is the structure of theological language as the turning over of the human speech faculty to this God in obedience? These are the kinds of prolegomenal questions which will be taken up here, with the hypothesis that discipleship can ground a better attempt to answer. But in order to make this clearer, we will need to work with a firmer definition of ‘discipleship,’ to which we will turn next.

1.6.4 Discipleship

‘Discipleship’ as it is used in this thesis should be understood as something qualitatively distinct from its commonsense meaning, although this commonsense meaning is itself muddled by a variety of influences. This section will briefly sort through some of the meanings typically ascribed to discipleship, then consider in what way these various meanings find a common core in how discipleship is normally conceived in its relation to theology. Then, in contrast to the core of that normal usage, discipleship as it is intended in this thesis will be defined.

Among pastors and lay leaders, discipleship is a pressing topic of conversation.⁶¹ While rarely defining discipleship explicitly, their usage seems to draw from two historical implementations of Christian theology which have become increasingly difficult to separate in current discussions. The first historical form which influences current definitions is the monastic tradition

⁶¹ The discussion which follows in the next few paragraphs about popular definitions of discipleship draws from a range of sources. For just a small sample of relatively recent books in which this variety of conceptions of discipleship appears, see David Lowes Watson, *Forming Christian Disciples: The Role of Covenant Discipleship and Class Leaders in the Congregation* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1995). Patricia Lamoureux and Paul J. Wadell, *The Christian Moral Life: Faithful Discipleship for a Global Society* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2010). Greg Ogden, *Discipleship Essentials: A Guide to Building Your Life in Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998). Mark Dever, *Discipling: How to Help Others Follow Jesus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016). Bobby William Harrington and Josh Robert Patrick, *The Disciple Maker’s Handbook: Seven Elements of a Discipleship Lifestyle* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017). Joe Wyrostek, *Discipleship Based Churches: How to Create and Maintain a Church of Disciples* (Chicago: MPI Publishing, 2012). Bobby Harrington and Alex Absalom, *Discipleship That Fits: The Five Kinds of Relationships God Uses to Help Us Grow* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016). Bill Hull, *The Complete Book of Discipleship: The Handbook to Studying the Bible* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2006)

emphasising contemplative and hesychastic practices. For some, discipleship has come to describe an experience of spiritual nearness to God. The obedience of the disciple is found in repeatedly returning to participation in divine presence. The fruit of obedience—and the mark of a disciple—is thus a cognitive, spiritual, and emotional ascent into a purer, more heightened perception of truth.

The second historical form which influences current definitions is what could be called the pietistic tradition in the broadest sense, appearing in diverse forms in 16th century Anabaptism, 17th and 18th century Lutheran pietism, and 19th and 20th century Holiness and Pentecostal movements. With these influences in mind, discipleship for some has come to describe a rigorous adherence in choice and act to the mandates of divine truth. The obedience of the disciple in these Protestant forms of purification takes a more overtly ethical form, an emphasis on the righteousness of the disciple's deeds rather than the disciple's mental or emotional state.

While these two streams are historically distinct, they commonly overlap in much of the current language about discipleship. Christian history has left contemporary usage with a broad definition. The concept is overstuffed. 'Discipleship' as it is used today can refer to characteristics of righteousness itself, or to a broad notion of prophetic, incarnational participation, or to private disciplines for spiritual formation, or to the institutional programs of churches for catechetical training and spiritual direction.

For the purposes of this thesis, the current failure to distinguish between various historical influences is noteworthy, but not necessarily problematic. Indeed, the definition of discipleship which will be developed later in this section could be understood as itself a kind of combination of these two streams—a kind of participatory obedience. But the ease with which these two streams are conflated in current discussions is noteworthy because it shows that they have become unmoored from some of the specific theological claims with which they were associated, historically. Discipleship is carrying on, even if—from the theologian's perspective—it is not always anchored as firmly to a theological rationale as the theologian might like.

While discipleship continues to be frequently discussed in churches, it presently carries little weight as a theological term. The place of discipleship in current theological discourse is accurately represented by the Dominican theologian Benoît-Dominique de La Soujeole in his reflection on *Gaudium et Spes*. He writes that, "The Christian condition is first of all a gift

received at baptism, but at the same time it is a vocation, a personal work for which no one can substitute for anyone else . . . [it] is both a gift and the great concern of life.”⁶² Each tradition may well replace baptism with another charism as the inaugural gift of the Christian life, but La Soujeole’s framing represents the assumed epistemological structure of Christian faith, broadly. First, there is the gift—be it revelation, justification, sacramental participation, the baptism of the Spirit—then there is a life lived in response to this gift. Holiness, as La Soujeole points out, is both essential and yet never primary. Discipleship is one facet of sanctification, the progressive unfolding of the Spirit’s work in the Christian’s body. “In remaining faithfully connected to the sources of grace . . . holiness, *as a gift of God*, begets holiness when accepted, as the human vocation, which is progressively realized.”⁶³

The sequence of gift and response leaves the theologian with two tasks, akin to Tillich’s “two basic needs” of the church which “a theological system is supposed to satisfy.”⁶⁴ The first is to guard the integrity of the gift, the sources of grace—be they liturgical, confessional, or otherwise—such that the church’s practice and proclamation of these graces retains its connection to the truth. The second is to continue the investigation of the gift in such a way that the truth is further explicated, thereby providing new insights on how Christians should live in their various contexts. The theologian’s task is therefore necessary for ensuring the link between the gift of God’s gracious self-disclosure and any activity which claims to be done in faithfulness to the Christian God. Theology, in this view, becomes the *sine qua non* of discipleship.

Discipleship, while it often remains unclearly defined in popular discourse, can at least be given a clearer sense in its relation to theology. The contemporary theologian lives within the relatively recent distinction between systematic and practical theology. In this distinction, the assumption is that discipleship falls firmly on the latter side of the theory-praxis binary. It is taken as a given, as one Methodist bishop has written, “that beliefs shape behavior and practice”⁶⁵ and so discipleship is widely assumed to be the application of insights reached in more studious reflection. Discipleship is downstream from theology, it is the implication of truth gained from the sources of grace, it is “the ‘so what’ which necessarily follows from the search” for God.⁶⁶

⁶² Benoît-Dominique La Soujeole, “The Universal Call to Holiness,” in *Vatican II: Renewal within Tradition*, eds. Matthew L. Lamb and Matthew Levering (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008): 37-53, on p. 40.

⁶³ La Soujeole, “Universal Call,” 41, emphasis in original.

⁶⁴ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Three volumes in one* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 5.

⁶⁵ Kenneth L. Carder, *Living Our Beliefs: The United Methodist Way* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1989), 11.

⁶⁶ N.T. Wright, *Following Jesus: Biblical Reflections on Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), ix.

Thus, while the literature on discipleship proliferates, it presumes that discipleship is entirely a secondary matter, the result of theology. To ask about discipleship as the grounds of theology would then seem to be less a grave error than mere nonsense.

Discipleship, as it is used in this thesis, must be defined by reference to a different starting point. There can be no question that, as Graham Ward puts it, “the language of discipleship is the language of pedagogy.”⁶⁷ Discipleship is instruction which intends to make the disciple’s entire disposition of thought, emotion, and action more like the teacher’s. But we cannot thereby take for granted that discipleship can simply borrow modern pedagogical notions and strategies. Admitting that discipleship is a kind of pedagogy does not immediately tell us the ‘what’ or ‘how’ of discipleship’s instruction. The nature of the content and the means by which it is conveyed must be defined for us by the nature of discipleship. Thus, discipleship eludes any definition which attempts to abstract from some relation to the thing itself. The one who speaks of discipleship is either walking in the Christian way or not. If not, then the meaning of the word is obscure. But even if so, the very act of defining is only one transitory moment on the way, and so the definition does not capture the nature of being a disciple, but finds itself already caught up in the pedagogical process which the speaker is undergoing.

This makes discipleship at once simple and yet inherently difficult to define. It is difficult to define because it is not principally a creature known through reflection. Its medium is the act of living itself. This makes a definition difficult to state clearly in advance. The very nature of theology’s media as linguistic enterprise, the very nature of this thesis qua text, is only tangentially related to the medium of knowledge which discipleship reveals. Discipleship is a life, a way, a walk, and thus not a description of a life, a way, a walk. A clearer picture of what is entailed in this claim will develop as we read Pascal, Kierkegaard, and Bonhoeffer. But the claim of this preliminary definition is that the pedagogical nature of discipleship not only reveals the methods by which knowledge is gained, but reveals the very medium of knowing, and thus the shape and nature of that which results, that which is deserving of the name, ‘knowledge.’

⁶⁷ Graham Ward, *The Politics of Discipleship: Becoming Postmaterial Citizens* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 274.

While difficult to define, discipleship is at the same time simple to understand. It was earlier noted that popular descriptions of discipleship continue to develop even as they have become untethered from their historical, theological underpinnings. This is less a phenomenon to be lamented than one to be marveled at. It suggests that discipleship may depend less on a particular set of theological claims than the theologian might assume. For many Christians, discipleship is quite easy to define. It is simply the task of obeying the Father by following the Son with the aid of the Spirit.

That this task should be at once simple and unclear cuts to the heart of ‘discipleship’ as it is used in this thesis. Something of its super-linguistic undefinability can be understood by reference to its origin in God’s call, in the “*lekh lekha*,”⁶⁸ in “Moses! Moses!”⁶⁹ and “Saul, Saul,”⁷⁰ in “I knew you,”⁷¹ in “Follow me.”⁷² The disciple follows God once God begins to lead. This is not to place the epistemic weight of discipleship on a sudden flash of illumination, nor, as we shall see in later chapters, to prioritise the experience of encounter, ecstatic or otherwise. It is to suggest that the call of God to obedience initiates a pedagogical work which is utterly unique and cannot be circumvented. Scripture’s encounter narratives are less about the theological weight of human ecstasy and more about the inseparability of the mode and content of instruction. There is no following of God which does not stand in some immediate relation to God, and conversely, there is no knowing of God which is not already in some respect a following. There is no speaking about discipleship which is not already in some relation, positive or negative, to walking as a disciple.

By no means, however, should this be read as a claim that everything entailed in discipleship is self-evident. Nor should this be read as an insistence that discipleship has nothing to do with knowledge or language as we understand it, or that it should be unreflective, or that it doesn’t involve growth and cultivation. It is to say that discipleship resists comprehensive accounts precisely because it is more expansive than our definitions, precisely because our defining falls at some point along discipleship’s way, and thus our attempts to define discipleship are not a map, but rather signposts of our own location. There is little room to say that a comprehensive

⁶⁸ Gen. 12:1

⁶⁹ Exod. 3:4

⁷⁰ Acts 9:4

⁷¹ Jer. 1:5

⁷² Luke 5:27

account of discipleship was obvious even to Christ's disciples. They were disciples, not scholars of discipleship, and so whatever assessment they could make of discipleship's nature appears both incomplete and somewhat besides the point. Their own walk as disciples had to include this inability to master discipleship, to be confounded as to why being a disciple might include the power to cast out demons,⁷³ but not the power to destroy enemies,⁷⁴ that their service to Christ might include at times, being served,⁷⁵ and at other times, not serving at all,⁷⁶ that it might lead them to sit unapologetically with Gentiles,⁷⁷ but not at Jesus' right hand.⁷⁸ One senses that the disciples struggled to put into mere words the essence of discipleship for their own disciples, finding it better to be physically present with them.⁷⁹ The attempt to describe, as an abstraction, the life of a disciple of Christ could only be attempted through ever larger lists of attributes to be sought or avoided, each attribute itself abstract.⁸⁰ The apostle Paul's advance into the life of discipleship appears as a journey into a theological language ever more urgently profound and yet ever less capaciously systematic, from master of the law⁸¹ to slave of Jesus Christ,⁸² "carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies."⁸³

In most theological models, discipleship is defined as the outworking of ethical, moral, relational, or spiritual principles derived from theological reflection. For the purposes of this thesis, discipleship refers to the activity of faithfulness to God already occurring in diverse Christian churches. Theology is thus what arises from theologising, which itself is only one task among many being carried out by Christians. The difficulty for the scholar of conceiving of action as anything other than a product of decision—and thus as a product of intellectual commitment—is the problem which this inquiry hopes to address. Therefore, a clearer understanding of what is meant here by discipleship will only unfold slowly. It cannot serve as a conceptual *a priori*, because it is not inherently conceptual. This thesis hypothesizes that it can still, however, serve as an *a priori*, even if the conceptualising which arises thereafter is different from what we

⁷³ Luke 10:17

⁷⁴ Luke 9:54-55

⁷⁵ John 13:6

⁷⁶ Luke 10:40

⁷⁷ Gal. 2:14

⁷⁸ Mark 10:40

⁷⁹ Gal. 4:20, 1 Thess. 2:17

⁸⁰ Gal. 5:22-23, 2 Pet. 1:5-7, 1 Thess. 4:3-6, Col. 3:5-14

⁸¹ Phil. 3:5

⁸² Rom. 1:1

⁸³ 2 Cor. 4:10

typically assume. It cannot be understood as prologue, as a first word, but as prolegomenon, as the ground from which words about the Christian God can be spoken.

1.7 Structure of the Research

This thesis will investigate what might be entailed in considering discipleship to be theology's prolegomenon by considering the epistemic implications of the work of three Christian thinkers deeply interested in the priority of discipleship. In the course of doing so, the hope is that discipleship will demonstrate the potential to serve as a prolegomenon in a way that uniquely eludes the common problem of circular reasoning. It will do so by re-considering what is entailed in theological reasoning which follows after discipleship. The rest of this thesis will expand on this notion through the following chapters. Chapters 2-4 form the heart of the thesis, developing the account of discipleship as theological prolegomena by reference to Pascal, Kierkegaard, and Bonhoeffer. Chapter 5 will then serve as a kind of application of the definition of theological reasoning developed in chapters 2-4. Chapter 6 will conclude with an extended reflection on where the implications of this investigation could lead future research.

Chapter 2 will begin our investigation with a close reading of the work of Blaise Pascal, focusing in particular on the epistemological claims of the *Pensées*. Pascal's work will introduce us to a unique notion of reason's media which results from the priority which he gives to the human incapacity revealed in the call to discipleship. God calls us to be disciples, we are unable to do so, and this inability incorporates even our intellectual condition.

Chapter 3 will continue with an investigation of the work of Søren Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard's insight expands on Pascal's by supplying us with a broader notion of how the whole of reality is conceived in relation to the call to discipleship. The call on the disciple's life to imitate the perfection of Christ creates a unique kind of dialectic in which the disciple is able to follow Christ only in virtue of being unable to follow Christ, thus entering into Christ's self-surrender by virtue of the divine undoing of consciousness.

Chapter 4 will take up the work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. While Kierkegaard's dialectic can lead to a sense of total negation, Bonhoeffer's supplements this sensibility with a more positive notion of *Christus praesens*. The availability of the present God-human is something to be

celebrated, but cautiously. Bonhoeffer's work, particularly between the years 1938-1941, provides a window into his attempt to navigate these two impulses. He argues simultaneously that discipleship entails reasons to believe in the possibility of knowing God's will while also restricting the disciple's knowledge. The balance of knowledge and ignorance in Bonhoeffer's work will be instructive for a broader notion of discipleship's epistemic implications.

Chapter 5 will serve as an application of theological reasoning after discipleship which will hopefully further clarify and develop the preceding argument. Discipleship clearly bears some relation to current theological and philosophical language surrounding 'embodiment.' Chapter 5 will investigate the work of a patristic writer, Clement of Alexandria, whose contrast of discipleship with Valentinian forms of knowing serves as an entry into a Christian notion of embodiment. This notion will be compared and contrasted with various approaches arising from critical theory—another discipline interested in re-thinking what constitutes embodied reasoning.

Chapter 6 will conclude by considering where this thesis' notion of discipleship as theological prolegomenon sits with respect to traditional theological forms of thought. Possible avenues for future research will be explored in a preliminary way by comparing this thesis' argument to a Barthian actualistic ontology and to the relation of nature and grace in the *nouvelle théologie*.

Chapter 2

Blaise Pascal and the Insufficiency of Language as the Media of Reason

2.1 Introduction

2.1.1 *Pascal and Christian reasoning*

Despite never being a theologian or a clergyman, Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) spent the majority of his adult life engaged in theological reflection, first in the context of ecclesial disputes, then later in developing his own account of an apologetic for Christian faith. In the task of this thesis to understand the possibilities of theology after discipleship, Pascal's consideration of Christian reasoning is useful. Pascal's notion of an embodied rationality, shaped by the daily disciplines of fidelity to God, illuminates the first step along our path. Discipleship is the ultimate rebuke to rationality as we commonly understand it, but rather than suggesting irrationality, discipleship presses us to consider whether we understand what we mean when we talk about the faculty of reason. How shall we think about reason if it turns out that we never attain to our own standards of rationality? Shall we give up on reason, or redefine it according to the possibility of its transformation? That is the question which Pascal's work will pose, and the question we will attempt to answer over the course of this chapter.¹

¹ All of the translations in this section are my own, and any errors are my own. I have, however, consulted with existing translations of some of Pascal's works. With respect to the *Lettres provinciales*, I have found particularly useful the translation by Thomas M'Crie, published as an ebook by the University of Adelaide Library, updated 2014, available at <https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/p/pascal/blaise/p27pr/index.html>. With respect to the *Pensées*, I have often turned to the translation by W.F. Trotter, published by the Christian Classics Ethereal Library, available at <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/pascal/pensees.html>. The quotations from Pascal's works in this chapter come from the newest two-volume critical edition: Blaise Pascal, *Oeuvres complètes*, 2 vol., ed. Michel Le Guern (Paris: Gallimard, 2000).

2.1.2 Biographical background

Born in 1623, in Clermont, France, Blaise Pascal initially followed his father's vocation into mathematics.² A precocious scientific mind, by age 25 he had published treatises on geometry, developed a prototype for a computing machine, and conducted the first observations of atmospheric pressure using mercury barometers. At the same time, however, he and his family were slowly being drawn in as partisans in the major theological controversy of 17th-century France. In 1645, when Pascal was 22, his father—while recovering from a broken leg—was attended to by a pair of monks from an abbey which had been increasingly influenced by the work of the Dutch bishop Cornelius Jansen (1585-1638). Over time, Pascal's entire family came to identify with this branch of Catholic thought; in 1651, his sister, Jacqueline, even became a nun under the direction of an abbess influenced by Jansenism.

While Jansenism would be anathematized by Pope Innocent X in his 1653 bull, *Cum occasione*, Pascal—along with many of its defenders—saw Jansenism not as a break with the Catholic church but as a revival of its true essence.³ The influence of Jansenism grew out of the posthumous proliferation of Jansen's work *Augustinus*, published in 1642. Not unlike the Reformers, Jansen took up a particular reading of Augustine's works that emphasised the insufficiency of human efforts apart from grace, and the overwhelming efficaciousness of grace once given to humanity. In this respect, *Augustinus* made explicit parallels between the semi-pelagians whom Augustine rejected and certain emphases in the Catholic theology of Jansen's day. These theses in particular were singled out for rebuke by *Cum occasione*.⁴ Following Jansen's death, the centre of Jansenist thought shifted to the abbey at Port-Royal, where the philosopher Antoine Arnauld became its most sophisticated defender. As we shall see later, Pascal's own entry into the larger theological polemic of the time was initially couched as a personal defense of Arnauld when the philosopher's appointment at the Sorbonne was called into question.

² The following biographical sketch of Pascal's life is indebted to Hugh M. Davidson, *Blaise Pascal* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1983); Anthony Levi, "Introduction," in Blaise Pascal, *Pensées and Other Writings*, ed. and trans. Honor Levi (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995); Desmond Clarke, "Blaise Pascal," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2015 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2015/entries/pascal/>.

³ The following is indebted to Sylvio Hermann De Franceschi, *Entre saint Augustine et saint Thomas: Les jansénistes et le refuge thomiste (1653-1663)* (Paris: Nolin, 2009), 63ff and F. Ellen Weaver, *The Evolution of the Reform of Port-Royal: From the Rule of Cîteaux to Jansenism* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1978), 65ff.

⁴ Innocent X, "From the Constitution '*Cum occasione*,' May 31, 1653: Errors said to have been extracted from the *Augustinus* of Cornelius Jansen," Our Lady of the Rosary (Taken from Henry Denzinger, *The Sources of Catholic Dogma*, 1957), accessed November 10, 2017, http://www.rosarychurch.net/history/1653_Innocent_X.html.

Significantly, in the midst of this ongoing theological dispute, Pascal underwent a life-altering epiphanic encounter with God. On a November night in 1654, Pascal experienced what would later be called *la nuit de feu*—his ‘night of fire.’ Pascal wrote an account of his experience on a fragment of parchment which he sewed into the lining of his coat and kept with him for the remainder of his life. Known as *Le Mémorial*, this fragment is typically published today along with the *Pensées*. In it, Pascal describes a revelation of the “God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob / not of the philosophers and of the learned.”⁵ Following this experience, Pascal set aside much of his mathematical work to focus on theology and apologetics, defending both Jansenism from the Catholic magisterium and faith more generally from philosophical skeptics. Much of his writing from this time remained unfinished, sitting in piles of manuscripts found and published after his death. Taken as a whole, however, they suggest a mind wholly devoted to developing an account of human reason originating in Pascal’s own desire for a “*soumission totale à Jésus-Christ*.”⁶

This chapter intends to develop an understanding of Pascal’s own peculiar form of Jansenism, a form which has potential to helpfully advance our understanding of theological reasoning after discipleship. It will do so by briefly taking up two of Pascal’s writings, a fragmentary set of reflections on grace, and his *Lettres provinciales*, in which he publicly defends Jansenism. The bulk of this chapter will then consider the *Pensées* which, though fragmentary in its own right, remains the place where it is most possible to develop a coherent understanding of Pascal’s position on human reason. Before looking at the primary literature, however, we will consider a variety of perspectives on Pascal’s understanding of reason from the secondary literature.

2.2 Review of the Literature on Pascal and Rationality

The question of what account of reason Pascal advances in his work hinges, for most commentators, on what one makes of his apologetic defense of Christianity—his ‘proof’ of God’s existence—in the *Pensées*. In this context, the most remarked upon portion of the *Pensées* is the section referred to among Pascal scholars by its opening juxtaposition, “*infini rien*”⁷—“infinite/nothing”—which contains the argument commonly known as Pascal’s wager. This section

⁵ *POC* 2, 851.

⁶ *POC* 2, 852.

⁷ *POC* 2, 676.

will consider the secondary literature on two questions. The first is, what attitude towards human reason undergirds Pascal's work? And the second is, what does this account imply for how we ought to understand the force of the wager? The reading of Pascal advanced in this thesis will contrast sharply with both of the typical answers to this question.

The influence of Jansenism on Pascal's work is often read, rather simplistically, as a conviction about human nature's complete fallenness, and thus as a suspicion of any observation or conclusion drawn from the faculties of human reason. In this regard, Pascal may appear as an irrationalist, an advocate for the impossibility of human reason and thus the priority and necessity of faith. This assumption drives Thomas Stokes' claim, for instance, that "Pascal seems to want to submit his reason to faith."⁸ With regards to Pascal's defense of Jansenism, Richard Parish writes that "the overstretching of reason is the epistemological misemphasis of which the Jesuits are deemed to be guilty."⁹ Applied to the broader question of the place of reason in Pascal's apologetic work, reason is taken to "constitute the overriding impediment to belief that characterizes the erroneous seeker."¹⁰ The perceived negativity towards human reason leaves us with two possibilities. Perhaps Pascal is a pure fideist, diminishing any place for human reason in the apprehension of divine truth. Or perhaps Pascal is suggesting that reason properly understood should be taken to mean something different than what we normally assume.

If the first reading is the case, then Pascal's irrationality seems to sit uneasily with what appears to be a kind of logical defense of the rationality of believing in God. It is not easy to square Pascal's rebuke of human reason *in toto* with claims that there are rational reasons to believe in God. This is the common way of reading the wager, however, as an argument in favor of the rationality of believing.

Pascal's wager has filtered into the popular mindset in the following form. If you believe, and you are right, you will gain heaven; if you are wrong, you lose nothing. Refuse to believe and, if you are right, you gain nothing, but if you are wrong, you risk eternal damnation. Faced with these prospects, one can make a case in favor of belief. Faith is actually the safer and therefore

⁸ Thomas Stokes, *Audience, Intention, and Rhetoric in Pascal and Simone Weil* (New York: Peter Lang, 1996), 71.

⁹ Richard Parish, *Pascal's Lettres Provinciales: A Study in Polemic* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 183.

¹⁰ Parish, *Pascal's Lettres Provinciales*, 183-4.

more rational bet—the course of action offering the greatest likelihood for maximising happiness. For the average 21st-century person, then, Pascal’s wager calls to mind heavenly riches and devilish torments weighed in a balance. This reading has even filtered from the popular mindset back into serious philosophical work—even the brilliant analytic philosopher Bernard Williams structures the force of the wager around the claim that “the badness of Hell is infinite”¹¹ and thus carries infinite weight in relation to finite, earthly sacrifices. This portrait persists, despite the fact that, as David Wetsel notes, “throughout the entire ‘infini/rien’ fragment, the possibility of Hell and eternal damnation is never explicitly mentioned.”¹² But nonetheless, Wetsel agrees with the formal structure of this argument as it is presented here. In Wetsel’s reading, Pascal only holds in the balance the positive possibilities:

“Wagering that God exists seems to entail only two possible consequences: (1) being wrong but never knowing that one has wagered incorrectly because consciousness is simply annihilated by death or (2) being correct and enjoying a subsequent ‘*éternité de vie et de bonheur*.’”¹³

Immediately, then, we should acknowledge that the two terms on which Pascal would have us wager are not heaven and hell, and thus not belief and unbelief, *per se*. Instead, the wager is understood to make an argument about the rationality of choosing to believe, weighing what one could gain against the earthly treasures one might surrender. According to Leslie Armour, “Blaise Pascal believed that one ought to wager one’s life on the truth of the proposition that God exists.”¹⁴ Understood in this way, as an actuarial appeal to dispassionate odds-making, the wager is a plea to give Christianity a chance. If one could just “*believe* without considering the evidence . . . one would immediately be in a better position than that of the non-believer.”¹⁵

Obviously, then, the wager as it is commonly understood does first entail a rebuke to one notion of rationality, even as it advances another notion of rationality. If confidence in human reason

¹¹ Bernard Williams, “Rawls and Pascal’s Wager,” in *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973-1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981), 94-100, on p. 99.

¹² David Wetsel, *Pascal and Disbelief: Catechesis and Conversion in the Pensées* (Washington D.C.: Catholic University Press of America, 1994), 254.

¹³ Wetsel, *Pascal and Disbelief*, 254.

¹⁴ Leslie Armour, “*Infini Rien*”: *Pascal’s Wager and the Human Paradox* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 1993), 1.

¹⁵ Paul Tobin, *The Rejection of Pascal’s Wager: A Skeptic’s Guide to the Bible and the Historical Jesus* (Bedfordshire: Authors OnLine, 2009), ix. Emphasis in original.

means confidence in the capacity of reason to provide demonstrable certainty about the nature of existence, then Pascal does chastise such confidence. The presupposition for this understanding of the wager is the admission that we live behind some kind of ‘veil of ignorance.’ The ‘rationality’ which the wager advances is thus a rationality which takes this state of affairs into account, which asks about how one should live if one does not have all the answers. In this respect, Pascal’s account of reason is pragmatic, born of “prudence,” a self-interested motivation to consider whether “it is in one’s interests to do that action.”¹⁶ As Jeff Jordan points out:

“Pascalian Wagers are pragmatic arguments that have the structure of gambles, a decision made in the midst of uncertainty. Pascal assumed that a person, just by virtue of being in the world, is in a betting situation such that he must bet his life on whether there is or is not a god. This may be a world in which God exists or this may be a world in which God does not exist. The upshot of Wager-style arguments is simply that, if one bets on God and believes, then there are two possible outcomes. Either God exists and one enjoys an eternity of bliss; or God does not exist and one loses little, if anything.”¹⁷

Of course, the definition of reason which arises out of such an argument is different from what we would normally expect. The belief in God which would ground Pascal’s rationality in this account would not function in the same way as the belief which grounds Descartes’. Scholars have noted this, but have also struggled with how best to articulate what Pascal is suggesting. Pascal’s ‘first principle’ cannot act like Descartes’ because it does not seem, itself, to be properly *known* in the first place. Even the first principle is veiled by ignorance. Instead, we are left with a rationality grounded largely in self-interest, a calculation about the best course of action. In the words of Daniel Garber, in the absence of certainty, Pascal’s wager advocates that one “follow a regimen, go to mass, take holy water, act like a believer and belief will follow.”¹⁸

¹⁶ Jeff Jordan, *Pascal’s Wager: Pragmatic Arguments and Belief in God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), 7.

¹⁷ Jordan, *Pascal’s Wager*, 30.

¹⁸ Daniel Garber, *What Happens After Pascal’s Wager: Living Faith and Rational Belief* (Milwaukee: Marquette UP, 2009), 10.

Framed in this way, Pascal's argument is unsettling and unconvincing. Garber questions whether the wager doesn't backfire, whether admitting that one is terribly uncertain but interested in playing the odds is really the kind of belief which would merit eternal salvation, whether one who simply takes up Pascal's regimen "is really entitled to belief."¹⁹ Certainly, the logic of self-interested accounting often seems to double back against Pascal. Modern gamblers play the odds in the other direction, agreeing with the sentiments of the protagonist in Joshua Ferris' novel, *To Rise Again at a Decent Hour*: "That was a mighty Pascal's Wager: the possibility of eternity in exchange for the limited hours of my one certain go-round."²⁰ The remoteness of an afterlife for a secular audience makes the possibility of eternal reward seem weightless compared to the earthly pleasures lost while grimly slogging through penance.

Furthermore, few philosophers are as willing to immediately accept the original chastening of human reason's potential. Many scholars have noted that the peculiarity of Pascal's approach to Christian reason leaves us with an unsettled definition of what constitutes true knowledge. His deviation from the logical, reasoned sequence of argumentation constitutes a "discursive language" or "geometric style"—in the words of one interpreter—which is a "problematic necessity" that "reflects our fall from the direct knowledge that was possible in Eden."²¹ The sort of rationality which is, by nature, conceptually elusive, may be entirely appropriate to Pascal's "subject—God," who "cannot be submitted to order, that is to say, a linear way of thinking."²² But it remains difficult for the contemporary epistemologist to feel satisfied with a definition of rationality which satisfies none of our intuitions about the universality of reason.

Édouard Morot-Sir exemplifies one of many attempts to make something useful for modern epistemology out of Pascal's reasoning by sorting and classifying its various uses:

The word 'reason' has two essential meanings in the Pascalian language. It refers, first, to a certain power of mind that is the power and gift of reasoning, i.e. of drawing conclusions from principles. It is universal for humans, although some are more gifted than others . . . Furthermore, 'reason' refers to the products

¹⁹ Garber, *What Happens*, 11.

²⁰ Joshua Ferris, *To Rise Again at a Decent Hour* (London: Little, Brown and Co., 2014), 8.

²¹ Buford Norman, *Portraits of Thought: Knowledge, Methods, and Styles in Pascal* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1988), 210.

²² Dawn Ludwin, *Blaise Pascal's Quest for the Ineffable* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 95.

of reason in the first sense; it then aims at any explanation or argument obtained by way of consequence . . . reasons can also be justifications, but then they become insidious, dangerous, especially when they are inspired by self-regard. There is therefore a good and a bad use of reason, good and bad reasons.²³

This differentiation is helpful and yet doesn't solve the puzzle. It clarifies two senses of the use of reason, and suggests that Pascal is not dismissing reason so much as he is dismissing the self-serving, sinful 'reasons' which are put to use justifying human pursuits. But, as we shall see, these two senses are not as easy to separate in Pascal's work as we might hope. While it is true that Pascal does not offer a wholesale rejection of reason, he does suggest that its misuse is so endemic to reason as we commonly understand it that reason properly-used must look radically different than what we expect.

In sum, then, there is widespread agreement that Pascal's notion of reason is embedded in the thrust of the *infini/rien*, but that the 'rationality' of the wager must be understood as a kind of reason which by its nature critiques reason as we typically conceive it. Various attempts to classify the characteristics of this alternative reason are unsatisfying in part because this taxonomical project is making use of reason in the very sense which Pascal rebukes.

While agreeing with the broad strokes of this description of the interpretive situation, the rest of this chapter will investigate Pascal's works to discern more clearly the nature of reason in its proper use. This requires returning to the wager, but indirectly, building slowly across a number of Pascal's works to discern how Christian discipleship serves in his thought to offer a different path. At the end of this path is something quite different than what we normally call knowledge, but which is, at the same time, the only intellectual situation deserving to be called 'knowing'.

²³ Édouard Morot-Sir, *La raison et la grâce selon Pascal* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1996), 88.

2.3 The mechanics of righteousness in *Écrits sur la grâce*

2.3.1 Data from the primary sources

Our investigation begins with a loose collection of papers known as the *Écrits sur la grâce*. These writings were unpublished as of Pascal's death, and it seems unclear whether they were ever intended to be published or even necessarily intended to form a single manuscript.²⁴ Found among Pascal's papers by his nephew, the originals were donated to the library at Saint-Germain-de-Prés and destroyed by fire in 1794. Thankfully, a 1779 version of Pascal's *Oeuvres* included a partial version of the *Écrits sur la grâce*, which is what we work with today, uncertain about how much of the originals has been permanently lost.

The *Écrits sur la grâce* are united by their theme—as the title suggests—but the question of grace around which they are united is meant in a rather more technical, theological sense. They are very consciously situated within the defense of Jansenism, and as such are an attempt to differentiate Pascal's understanding of grace from that advanced by the papal opinion of *Cum occasione*. At the same time, intending to remain faithfully Catholic, Pascal is careful to distinguish his position from that of the Reformers. Taken as a whole, Pascal's intention is to be faithfully Augustinian,²⁵ and thus faithful to the tradition, while demonstrating that, in fact, “Calvin lacked conformity to Saint Augustine.”²⁶ This section will focus quite narrowly on the way in which Pascal forms this middle ground.

The angle from which Pascal approaches the nature of grace is not only framed by the Jansenist controversy, but is even more specifically focused on a technical question within that debate. That question is about how one interprets the Council of Trent's insistence “that the commandments are not impossible for the justified.”²⁷ In its sixth session, the council had anathematized “that rash saying . . . that the observance of the commandments of God is impossible for one that is justified.”²⁸ God does not command impossibilities, the decree continues, and so:

²⁴ This brief history of the *Écrits sur la grâce* is a summary drawn from the critical commentary supplied by Michel Le Guern. See *POC* 2, 1210.

²⁵ *POC* 2, 287ff.

²⁶ *POC* 2, 292.

²⁷ *POC* 2, 211.

²⁸ Council of Trent, *The canons and decrees of the sacred and oecumenical Council of Trent*, ed. and trans. J. Waterworth (London: Dolman, 1848), 38.

“the just themselves ought to feel themselves the more obligated to walk in the way of justice, in that, being already freed from sins, but made servants of God, they are able, living soberly, justly, and godly, to proceed onwards through Jesus Christ, by whom they have had access unto this grace.”²⁹

Pascal wants to affirm this statement, but believes it requires nuance to do so correctly, lest one interpret the council to be advocating a semi-pelagian position. The proposition “‘the commandments are possible for the justified’ has two completely different meanings, each distant from the other.”³⁰ The first sense in which the proposition can be understood “is that the justified, considered at one moment of his justification, always has the proximate power to fulfill the commandments in the following moment.”³¹ This, Pascal argues, is the pelagian interpretation, “which the Church has always fought.”³² The second sense in which the proposition can be understood is that “the justified, acting as justified and through *un mouvement de charité*, can fulfill the commandments in the action that they do by charity.”³³

A great deal depends on what Pascal means by the ‘movement of charity,’ or, as we might say in more contemporary language, this ‘movement of love.’ Pascal does not offer an explicit definition, but he does contrast this second possibility—that it is indeed possible to obey commandments through a participation in the movement of love—with a Protestant understanding of grace:

The Lutherans formally maintained that the actions of the righteous, even those done by love, are always necessarily sinful, and that concupiscence, which always reigns in this life, so strongly corrupts the effect of love that, no matter how righteous men are and by what movements of love they act, covetousness is always so much a part of them that they not only fail to fulfill the commands, but violate them, and are therefore absolutely incapable of keeping them.³⁴

²⁹ Council of Trent, *Canons and decrees*, 38.

³⁰ *POC* 2, 211.

³¹ *POC* 2, 211.

³² *POC* 2, 211.

³³ *POC* 2, 211.

³⁴ *POC* 2, 212.

This is the middle ground which Pascal hopes to occupy. The “Pelagians maintain that the commandments are always possible for the justified, in the first sense.”³⁵ Meanwhile, “the Lutherans maintain that the commandments are always impossible, even in the second sense.”³⁶ The Council of Trent, in Pascal’s reading, rejects both positions, albeit while “refusing to separate them.” While this leads to a possible confusion, it also opens up for Pascal the possibility that a Jansenist reading of Trent could play in this middle space.

2.3.2 Observations

As a preliminary observation, Pascal clearly reads the Protestants—perhaps unfairly—as suggesting that no action can ever be considered righteous, that all deeds are spoiled by the presence of sin in human nature. In opposition, Pascal advocates for the idea that righteous deeds can be done in a kind of participation with the movement of love. How one understands this movement of love is important but not entirely clear. At minimum, however, it suggests a kind of overflow or outpouring of divine-initiated activity which does not properly belong to the righteous person at any point, and yet is credited to the righteous person to the extent that they join with this work. Hervé Pasqua puts it best when he writes that, “The graced action in the soul does not occur without aide . . . This aide consists in wanting what God wants and seeing how God sees without identifying human will and intelligence with God . . . The union is not fusion.”³⁷

What is perhaps even more intriguing, however, is the distinction Pascal draws with the main line of Catholic thought. He reads into the tradition what we might call a ‘mechanistic’ understanding of human behavior. The traditional understanding breaks the actions and decisions of the human being down into very discrete moments. Since each moment is independent, the grace imparted to the righteous person at one moment is preparatory. It invades the person’s life at one moment and, in order to be efficacious for future moments, alters the righteous person such that the person is now empowered to choose correctly. The alternative would be a discrete act of God’s grace at each individual moment, a doctrine which would sound plainly Protestant for Pascal. What makes the Catholic position sound semi-pelagian to Pascal is not a sequencing of events, not a suggestion that human effort in any way precedes divine effort. It

³⁵ *POC* 2, 212.

³⁶ *POC* 2, 212.

³⁷ Hervé Pasqua, *Blaise Pascal: penseur de la grâce* (Paris: Téqui, 2000), 187.

is instead the suggestion that grace must be imparted and then withdraw, thereby properly belonging to the righteous person in the next moment, freeing them to choose rightly as they turn to meet the flow of oncoming moments. In that sense, the real issue is a notion of human activity broken into such discrete, independent moments. This contrast is all the stronger when Pascal compares it to the ‘movement of love,’ which suggests a more organic relation of the person to the flow of time. Grace is operative, in Pascal’s view, but not properly imparted, because it continues to be operative in one continuous action across time. It creates—from a Jansenist perspective—neither the absurdity of the Protestant God’s repetitive, staccato initiation of grace in discrete times, nor the semi-pelagian problem of grace being deposited in the human life and left for the human’s free use apart from divine effort.

For now, this notion of the organic movement of love in which the righteous person is capable of participating simply serves as an indicator of Pascal’s interests. It presages, in small ways, the argument of the *Pensées*. Before moving directly into that work, however, we will consider more closely the argument of the *Lettres provinciales*.

2.4 Religious Language and its Misuse in the *Lettres provinciales*

2.4.1 Data from the primary source

The *Lettres provinciales* are a set of eighteen public letters (plus an unpublished fragment of a nineteenth) written by Pascal between January, 1656 and March, 1657.³⁸ The letters were all written anonymously “to a provincial by one of his friends on the subject of the present disputes in the Sorbonne.”³⁹ The occasion for the writing of the first letter was the examination of Antoine Arnauld by an assembly of the university. Arnauld had previously written a letter in which he claimed “that he had pored over Jansen’s book, and had not found the propositions condemned by the late pope” in *Cum occasione*.⁴⁰ Having planted his flag with the Jansenists, Arnauld’s views were now subject to suspicion of heresy.

Pascal, while defending Arnauld, does so circuitously. Rather than merely entering the debate on its own merits, the first three letters read as a kind of comedic satire, with the author portraying himself as a slightly dimwitted but neutral observer interviewing various partisans in

³⁸ See Michel Le Guern’s preface to the *Lettres provinciales*. *POC 1*, 579ff.

³⁹ *POC 1*, 589.

⁴⁰ *POC 1*, 589.

order to understand the furor happening at the Sorbonne over the trial of Arnauld. Letters four through ten follow a similar conceit, although the tone shifts as the author becomes increasingly scandalized by the ethical reasoning of a Jesuit monk. Letters eleven through nineteen take on an increasingly strident and polemic tone as the author responds to scathing and personal attacks circulating in response to his earlier letters.

The first ten letters are worth considering for our purposes in closer detail, as their peculiar tone lends an important aspect to Pascal's argument. The conceit of the naive theological amateur trying to understand sophisticated debates gives the narrator—*l'Ami du provincial*—an exasperated air, unable to see any real substance or logical clarity in the concerns of the theological magisters. And while this tone has a strategic purpose—as a defense of Arnauld that also makes an appeal to popular opinion—it is itself a kind of theological argument. In developing his own thoughts indirectly, Pascal is also developing a meta-critique about the nature of theological discourse, and it is this aspect of the *Lettres Provinciales* which is worth examining.

The first letter addresses the question of “*le pouvoir prochain*”—the ‘proximate power’ which also made an appearance in Pascal's writings on grace.⁴¹ The anonymous author of the letter claims neutrality on the Sorbonne's investigation—“whether M. Arnauld has been reckless or not does not concern my conscience”—but nonetheless “curiosity prompted me to ascertain if these propositions [which Arnauld is accused of defending] are in Jansen.”⁴² The narrator begins his own investigation by approaching a theologian known as one of “the most zealous opponents of the Jansenists.”⁴³ The narrator puts to this theologian a question—whether or not he would subscribe to the statement that “grace is given to all.”⁴⁴ The theologian immediately responds that this is the wrong question to ask if one is trying to understand the disagreement between Arnauld and the assembly, for on this point, even “the examiners themselves have said . . . that this opinion is problematic.”⁴⁵ This encounter establishes what will be a recurring motif across the *Lettres provinciales*, as well as a central part of Pascal's defense and his the-

⁴¹ *POC 1*, 594.

⁴² *POC 1*, 590.

⁴³ *POC 1*, 591.

⁴⁴ *POC 1*, 591.

⁴⁵ *POC 1*, 591.

ological critique. This motif is the frequent discovery in the course of the narrator's 'investigation' that there is so little doctrinal accord in the anti-Jansenist camp that they cannot agree among themselves as to which of the Jansenists' deviations rises to the level of heresy.

As the letter develops and the narrator conducts more interviews, he encounters theologians using the word 'proximate' to describe the capacity justified humans have for obeying God. He requests clarification, first from an anti-Jansenist Jesuit:

—'When you say that all of the righteous always have proximate power to follow the commandments, you mean that they always have all the grace necessary to keep them, in such a way that they lack nothing from God.'

—'Hold on,' he replied, 'they always have everything necessary for keeping them, or at least for asking God.'

—'I understand better now,' I said, 'they have everything necessary for praying to God for help, without requiring any new grace from God to enable them to pray.'

—'You understand it,' he said.⁴⁶

Immediately after gaining this insight, however, the narrator turns to a different anti-Jansenist theologian, a "*nouveau thomiste*,"⁴⁷ and puts to him the definition received from the previous theologian. The neo-Thomist (a position which Pascal associates with the Dominicans or, as they were nicknamed in pre-Revolutionary France, the Jacobins) disagrees, and a new round of questioning ensues to clarify this second definition of 'proximate power':

—'When you say that the righteous always have the proximate power to pray to God, you mean that they require another resource for praying, and without that resource they will never pray.'

—'That's exactly right,' he said.⁴⁸

The first theologian, the Jesuit, says that the justified possess a proximate power that, at minimum, always gives them the capability to pray for divine assistance. The second theologian,

⁴⁶ *POC 1*, 594.

⁴⁷ *POC 1*, 594.

⁴⁸ *POC 1*, 594.

the Dominican, says that the justified person needs grace even to be able to ask for divine assistance in the first place.

But to dwell too long at this level of detail is actually to miss the rhetorical strategy of the letter, for “by a fortune I found extraordinary,”⁴⁹ the first theologian arrives while the narrator is interviewing the second. In trying to pin down the disagreement between the two, the investigation quickly descends into farce. The two theologians refuse to admit their disagreement. They insist that as long as they both are using the phrase ‘proximate power,’ it makes no difference whether they mean entirely different things by it. One rebukes the narrator: “Are you trying to cause an argument between us? Are we not agreed that there is no point to explaining the word ‘proximate,’ but that we will use it on both sides without saying what it means?”⁵⁰

The narrator rises from his seat in frustration, believing himself to have “penetrated their designs,” uncovering their “*pure chicanerie*.”⁵¹ His final, sarcastic determination is that “it has been decided that the syllables ‘pro-xi-mate’ should be pronounced,” and that, without any regard to the substance of what is meant, “I should pronounce the words with my lips or risk being named a heretic.”⁵² The narrator’s explicit conclusion is that the academy “should banish that barbaric word, which causes so many divisions, from the Sorbonne.”⁵³ But, with respect to the defense of Arnauld, the reader of the first letter is left to agree with an earlier interview in which the narrator spoke to a Jansenist representative. Although the narrator hadn’t fully believed him at the time, the Jansenist’s reading of the situation is proved correct by the end. The Jansenist says of Arnauld’s opponents:

They are so little of the same opinion that they are completely contrary to one another. But, being entirely united in their plans to ruin M. Arnauld, they have determined to agree on the term ‘proximate,’ which both sides may use together while understanding it differently. By speaking the same language, and thus presenting a facade of unity, they can form large numbers into a formidable body to crush him convincingly.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ *POC 1*, 595.

⁵⁰ *POC 1*, 595.

⁵¹ *POC 1*, 595.

⁵² *POC 1*, 596.

⁵³ *POC 1*, 596.

⁵⁴ *POC 1*, 593.

The first letter thereby establishes a pattern for the polemic of the *Lettres provinciales*. A supposedly neutral narrator investigates the theological case against the Jansenists, only to discover such perfidy, sophistry, and brazen grasping for political power among the anti-Jansenists as to call into question whether they even deserve to be called Christians.

The second letter follows in a similar vein, as the narrator attempts to discern what is meant in the theological debates by “sufficient grace.”⁵⁵ Much as the Jansenists are accused of heresy for denying that the justified have a proximate power to act rightly, they are equally accused of heresy for denying that the justified possess sufficient grace. The Jansenists’ argument is that “no grace can be called sufficient if it is not also efficacious,” meaning that if the justified actually possessed a grace worthy of being called ‘sufficient,’ it would also be efficacious in a way that “determines the [human] will to act.”⁵⁶ A person with sufficient grace would also be effectively graced in such a way that their will itself would be transformed, and all their subsequent actions would be righteous. But since it is obviously the case that not all Christians act righteously, they must not possess efficacious grace, and thus must not possess any grace which could be called ‘sufficient.’

The anti-Jansenists agree among themselves on the necessity of “admitting a sufficient grace given to all humans,”⁵⁷ but, again, cannot agree on the particulars. The Jesuits subordinate sufficient grace to the human will, such that “the will renders it efficacious or inefficacious by its own choice, without any additional aid from God.”⁵⁸ The neo-Thomistic Dominicans, however, “maintain . . . that humans never act by efficient grace alone, but that, in order to act, God gives them an ‘efficacious grace’ that really determines their will to take up the action, and God does not give this efficacious grace to everyone.”⁵⁹

Of course, for the narrator, this neo-Thomist position sounds no different than the Jansenist position. Both believe that grace is given to humans, but that without a special divine grant of efficacious grace, righteous deeds are not possible. The only difference is that the Jansenists

⁵⁵ *POC 1*, 597.

⁵⁶ *POC 1*, 597.

⁵⁷ *POC 1*, 598.

⁵⁸ *POC 1*, 597.

⁵⁹ *POC 1*, 598.

refuse to call any grace ‘sufficient’ if it is not also efficacious, while the Dominicans “do not refuse to say that all humans have ‘sufficient grace.’”⁶⁰ Given the similarity of their positions, why would the Dominicans join so ardently with the Jesuits in attacking the Jansenists?

Here we come to the main thrust of the polemic, in which the Jesuits are revealed as savvy manipulators. “The Dominicans are too powerful . . . and the Jesuits too political to openly break with them.”⁶¹ Privately, in their schools of theology, the Dominicans continue teaching that “St. Thomas . . . is diametrically opposed” to the teaching of “sufficient grace in the Jesuit sense.”⁶² By holding fast to this ‘true’ reading of Aquinas, the Dominicans actually defend a legacy which the Jansenists understand themselves to be part of, the doctrine of “victorious grace, awaited by the patriarchs, provided by Jesus Christ, preached by St. Paul, explained by St. Augustine” and “confirmed by St. Bernard, the last of the Fathers.”⁶³ But publicly, the Dominicans are trapped, and cannot admit what they teach privately. The Jesuits have succeeded in a kind of public relations game, convincing popular opinion that any denial of sufficient grace amounts to Protestantism.⁶⁴ Unless the Dominicans want “to be denounced as Calvinists and treated like Jansenists,”⁶⁵ then they must continue to publicly state that they believe in sufficient grace, even while they privately teach a very different substance to the doctrine. The Jesuits, for their part, “are content to have won [the Dominicans] over to admitting the name ‘sufficient grace,’ even if they understand it in a different sense,”⁶⁶ and do not find it politically expedient to press further at this stage. With respect to Arnauld then, “*elle est bizarre*,”⁶⁷ one of the narrator’s interlocutors says—this situation in which the Church finds itself prosecuting theological views which a majority of its own theologians also hold, but which they are simply unwilling to admit publicly.

Again, without becoming too enmeshed in the details of the polemic, one begins to see in Pascal’s second letter a growing concern not only with the political nature of the Church, but with

⁶⁰ *POC 1*, 598.

⁶¹ *POC 1*, 598.

⁶² *POC 1*, 604.

⁶³ *POC 1*, 604.

⁶⁴ *POC 1*, 604.

⁶⁵ *POC 1*, 604.

⁶⁶ *POC 1*, 598.

⁶⁷ *POC 1*, 598.

how easily theological language is bent to serve these sectarian agendas. At one point, the narrator of the second letter, in conversation with a Dominican representative, says:

“There are two things in these words, ‘sufficient grace.’ There is the sound, which is nothing more than mere breath, and there is the thing signified, which is real and effective . . . it is clear that you oppose [the Jesuits] regarding the substance of the term, and that you simply agree with the sound.”⁶⁸

One of the noteworthy features of the *Lettres provinciales* is that they represent a real concern in Pascal’s mind about how theological language—even as it is being affirmed—can be readily detached from the thing itself. Theology too quickly permits the mere sounds to take on a life of their own, generating division and debate while falling farther away from the reality of God. Increasingly, as we shall see more fully in the *Pensées*, if there is to be an analogical bridge across the Kantian divide between the reality of God and the representations of humans, this bridge must be constructed on foundations more solidly sunk into the thing itself. Language—inherently ephemeral—is a less dependable construction material than theology would often have us believe.

The third letter we will pass over briefly, as it follows much the same conceit as the first two. Prior to the third letter, the trial of Arnauld had reached its conclusion; a censure had been handed down, declaring his views heretical. The narrator of the third letter is confounded by the brevity of the verdict, which reads, “This proposition is rash, impious, blasphemous, accursed, and heretical.”⁶⁹ The narrator, making a tongue-in-cheek show of his own desire to remain ‘orthodox,’ frets over his inability to distinguish between Arnauld’s position and the traditional position of the Church. He worries that even trying to follow the reasoning of the “penetrating”⁷⁰ minds of the assembly might be foolhardy, the difference between the Church’s truth and the position of Arnauld being so slight that it would be just as easy to become a heretic oneself as to understand the problem:

Do we want to be wiser than our masters? . . . We would go astray in this inquiry.

It would take nothing to render even this censure heretical. Truth is so delicate

⁶⁸ *POC 1*, 601.

⁶⁹ *POC 1*, 609.

⁷⁰ *POC 1*, 610.

that if we turn from it slightly, we fall into error; but this error is also so delicate that if we diverge from it a little, we find ourselves back at the truth. There is nothing but an imperceptible point between this proposition and folly. The distance is so imperceptible that I am terrified lest, in not seeing it, I place myself contrary to the doctors of the Church in attempting to conform too zealously to the doctors of the Sorbonne. In this dread, I have judged it necessary to consult with one who, by policy, was neutral on the first question, in order to learn from the truth of the matter.⁷¹

The narrator consults with a supposedly neutral theologian, who puts his mind to rest, ironically, by assuring him that the trial was a farce. The assembly is guided by a courtier's craftiness—"intrigue much, speak little, write nothing."⁷² Their verdict has offered no real theological guidance for the discerning laity, because they were never really engaged in a theological debate in the first place. What was really at stake was a test of the assembly's authority by Arnauld's commanding self-defense, unwilling to bow to the original rebuke. As such, the narrator's interlocutor reports a statement supposedly overheard at the assembly, that Arnauld's position "would have been orthodox in another mouth."⁷³ The narrator is thus relieved from his anxiety about falling into unorthodox belief. He cannot see the difference between Arnauld's statements and Catholic orthodoxy. But it is not important that he see the difference. As long as he is not, himself, Arnauld, he can even agree with these statements, because Arnauld "is not a heretic for anything he has said or written, but only for being M. Arnauld."⁷⁴ The narrator's cynicism about the use of theological language thus grows deeper and deeper.

Letters four through ten provide a glimpse into a kind of ethical application of the cynicism about theological language developed over the first three letters. But it also gives us an increasing sense of how Pascal understands the call to discipleship, by contrasting the reasoning of the disciple with the casuistry of the Jesuit scholastics. This run of letters is framed by the narrator's increasingly open conversion to Jansenism. Initially lacking "confidence in what our friend had taught me" (meaning the Jansenist interlocutor the in earlier letters), the narrator "wanted to see [the Jesuits] for myself."⁷⁵ The formal conceit of the letters is thus the narrator

⁷¹ *POC 1*, 610.

⁷² *POC 1*, 612.

⁷³ *POC 1*, 612.

⁷⁴ *POC 1*, 613.

⁷⁵ *POC 1*, 625.

bringing along the Jansenist theologian for an extended interview with a Jesuit priest, unfolding over seven letters. The narrator is warned by the Jansenist from the beginning that:

You will easily notice in the relaxation of their morality the explanation of their doctrine concerning grace. You will see the Christian virtues so confused and devoid of the love which is their soul and life. You will see so many crimes excused and corruption tolerated that you will no longer find it strange that they maintain that humans always have enough grace for a pious life, once you see what they mean by piety.⁷⁶

The polemical force of the work is here, in the narrator's insistence to the reader that "I have found that [the Jansenist] told me nothing but the truth. I believe he hasn't lied. You will see this from the record of these meetings."⁷⁷

Over the course of these meetings, the narrator grows increasingly incredulous at the ethical reasoning of the priest. Receiving particularly harsh critique is the moral theology of the Spanish Jesuits, especially the work of Gabriel Vázquez and Antonio Escobar. Along with others, the Jesuit moral theologians have created a nearly Talmudic system of commentary on Aristotle and Aquinas amounting to an extraordinarily detailed categorization of what constitutes sin. This edifice, as the narrator learns, is constructed on a foundation of "an indubitable principle, that an action cannot be considered a sin if God does not give us, prior to committing it, knowledge of the evil in the action, and an inspiration than incites us to avoid it."⁷⁸

Immediately, for the narrator, this a startling assertion, because it only makes people guilty when they violate an internal sense of wrong. People who feel no compunction about their actions, by definition, can never be guilty of anything. Sarcastically, the narrator offers to introduce the Jesuit to—by his definition—a cohort of saints:

"You have never seen people with so few sins, people who never think of God, whose vices overwhelm their reason. They have never become acquainted with

⁷⁶ *POC 1*, 628.

⁷⁷ *POC 1*, 625.

⁷⁸ *POC 1*, 615.

their illness, nor with the physician who could cure them. It has never occurred to them to desire a healthy soul, much less to pray for God to grant them one. According to M. Le Moyne, they still remain as innocent as the day of their baptism.”⁷⁹

It is a short step from this principle to the scholastic’s driving logic for creating a compendium of definitions about right and wrong deeds. This driving logic is what the narrator learns to refer to as “the doctrine of probable opinions.”⁸⁰ In theory, the doctrine goes, in the face of reality’s complexity, one’s moral reasoning ought to be guided by the preponderance of opinion from the magisterium, the collected wisdom on the course of action most probably correct. But in the inevitable swirl of conflicting theological intuitions, the Jesuits have also created a situation in which, as long as one can make a case as to why their action is justifiable, they cannot really be said to have knowledge that it is evil, and thus cannot truly be considered culpable. With an implicit roll of his eyes, the narrator marvels at this “remarkably comfortable” doctrine in which “the contrary opinions of your doctors” allow that “if you do not find your accounts squared by one, you can flee to the other and find yourself safe.”⁸¹ Once moral reasoning meets the self-justifying impulse of the sinner—in which almost any evil feels warranted to the perpetrator as they are committing it—then it suddenly appears as if there are no sins at all.

In practice, the parsing of moral claims thus amounts to an endless exegesis of traditional verbiage in order to find possibilities within it that could swing the ‘probability’ of theological opinion “by the interpretation of some term.”⁸² A number of examples crop up over the course of the letters. Pope Gregory XIV’s prohibition against harboring assassins in churches is diminished when the priest argues that “we understand the word ‘assassin’ to mean someone who kills for money.”⁸³ But someone “who kills to oblige his friends, without receiving money, isn’t an assassin.”⁸⁴ And so churches may indeed offer sanctuary to a hitman, provided that he kills out of fidelity to his master, rather than as part of an immediate exchange of money. In a

⁷⁹ *POC 1*, 617.

⁸⁰ *POC 1*, 627.

⁸¹ *POC 1*, 633.

⁸² *POC 1*, 636.

⁸³ *POC 1*, 636-7.

⁸⁴ *POC 1*, 637.

similar manner, Escobar redefines ‘bribery’ in such a way that judges are only guilty of corruption if they receive payment and *injure* a party in the case, not if they are paid merely to *benefit* one party. If the judge merely “takes up the cause of one . . . in consideration of his gift,” then “he does no injury to the others” by merely giving to one the friendly verdict “he was free to give to any of them at his pleasure.”⁸⁵

Not only civil obligations but religious practices are caught up in this wordplay. In confession, one “finds many annoying things”—“shame” and “regret” chief among them—but the Jesuits have created ways to “soften or mitigate each one.”⁸⁶ Following Escobar and Suarez, the sinner is permitted two confessors, a special “one for mortal sins” in addition to the common confessor “for venial sins,” because it is “important to maintain the esteem” of the ordinary confessor.⁸⁷ The confessor, for his part, “has no right to ask if the sin which [the penitent] is confessing is a habitual sin,” because the confessor “has no right to cause the penitent shame for his frequent relapses.”⁸⁸ The task of being a Christian is, in every respect, rendered easier and more accessible, demanding little change in the adherent. ‘Devotion’ becomes another word which once signified the giving of one’s whole heart and desire,⁸⁹ but now means “saluting the Holy Virgin when you encounter her image”⁹⁰ or—if even this proves too burdensome—“put[ting] a chaplet on one’s arm or a rosary in one’s pocket, and be completely assured of salvation.”⁹¹

As the *Lettres provinciales* unfold, we see more clearly Pascal’s concern about Jesuit moral theology becoming a way of avoiding the possibility of contradiction, and thus a way of avoiding ever really being in the wrong. The semantic proliferation around words and ideas means that one’s own interpretation is never subverted by any kind encounter with a divine Word. Mathematically-speaking, we might say, the ‘doctrine of probable opinion’ could be intended to create answers out of confusion, but instead it creates endless possibilities in place of conviction. As the narrator points out to the priest, there are “cases where the ‘pro’ and the ‘con’ each seem to have the better of the probability.”⁹² It might seem that one would always judge

⁸⁵ *POC 1*, 661.

⁸⁶ *POC 1*, 685.

⁸⁷ *POC 1*, 685.

⁸⁸ *POC 1*, 685.

⁸⁹ *POC 1*, 672.

⁹⁰ *POC 1*, 672.

⁹¹ *POC 1*, 673.

⁹² *POC 1*, 642.

as more probable the opinions “following the authority of Filiutius and Escobar,” but to weigh all opinions “within the sphere of probability” is actually to leave room for “contrary opinions, and to support these with reasons as well.”⁹³ The Jesuit approach, while appearing at first to accommodate the complexity of moral intuitions in society, is all too easily used as a way of evading any final conclusion, and thus any real responsibility.

All of this stands opposed to the way Pascal seems to understand the hermeneutic of discipleship. It might appear at first glance that Pascal is advocating for a kind of biblical literalism, but that would be somewhat anachronistic. Pascal is well-versed in the history of nuanced patristic interpretations, and never advocates for a return *ad fontes* of a ‘plain reading’ of scripture in a way one finds in some Protestant polemics of the era. But he takes the force of the word to be found in its power to contradict the reader, to call the reader to a new way of thinking, to repentance or *metanoia*. Without falling into a simplistic literalism, what does it mean to approach scripture or tradition with a hermeneutic that allows one’s own presumptions—and even one’s own ethical stance—to be contradicted?

Among many examples of Pascal’s scriptural hermeneutic, one particular engagement with a passage from Luke’s gospel serves as a useful representative. Jesus says, “give alms out of *votre superflu*”—your superfluity.⁹⁴ Pascal is quoting here from Luke 11:41, a difficult verse to translate. The Catholic interpretation of Pascal’s era placed undue weight on the Vulgate translation, “*verumtamen quod superest*,” and so *superest* became the French *superflu*—that which is above or beyond. In contrast, the Greek reads “*ta enonta dote eleēmosunēn*,” yielding a more literal translation, “that which is within, give as charity.” Even with the Vulgate in mind, however, the context of Luke 11 should clarify that Jesus is telling his disciples to give abundantly more—the whole of their beings—as alms to the poor, unlike the Pharisees who “clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside . . . are full of greed and wickedness.”⁹⁵ This seems relatively self-evident to Pascal’s narrator, but he is shocked to discover that, in the hands of Vazquez, the command to give out of one’s ‘superfluity’ has become a command to give only out of that which is well beyond what “persons in this world store up in order to improve their condition.”⁹⁶ Since even the wealthiest people consider their accumulation to be

⁹³ *POC 1*, 642.

⁹⁴ *POC 1*, 637.

⁹⁵ Luke 11:39

⁹⁶ *POC 1*, 637.

improving their condition—and thus, in a sense, necessary for their present quality of life—Vazquez is left to concede that “there is nothing of superfluity to be found in this world, not even among kings.”⁹⁷ The rich are comforted to know that, as long as they believe they benefit from their wealth, it is not excessive, and they have no need to share it. Here we have the beginning of a contrast. Pascal’s understanding of Luke 11:41 is not its ‘plain sense,’ per se, but it is a meaning derived from a holistic sense of how one must be a disciple, rather than a parsing of meaning to permit an evasion of sacrificial giving without thereby putting one’s eternal soul at risk.

This hermeneutical contrast becomes more stark in a passage in the seventh letter about a pressing topic of concern in Pascal’s day—the morality of men dueling one another to the death over insults to their honor. The priest admits that “the *point d’honneur* . . . is constantly driving people to acts of violence apparently quite contrary to Christian piety.” But, thankfully, the Jesuit scholastics have “discovered expedients . . . to permit these gentlemen to maintain and repair their honor by the methods ordinarily used in the world” and thus “to hold together two things so evidently contradictory as piety and honor.”⁹⁸ Romans 12:17 forbids repaying anyone evil with evil, and so a noble entering a duel—in the words of the Flemish Jesuit Leonardus Lessius—“cannot intend to avenge himself, but may lawfully have an intention to avoid infamy.”⁹⁹ “Honor is more valuable than life,” Lessius says later, and so if “one can kill to defend life, one must also be able to kill in defense of honor.”¹⁰⁰ The insults to honor which one may “justifiably defend” include “when one wants to strike us with a baton, or with a slap, or wants to offend us with words or signs.”¹⁰¹

Here, the narrator objects: “clearly human life is in grave danger if one can be conscientiously put to death for defamatory speech or a rude gesture.”¹⁰² The priest admits as much, but insists that the Jesuits do not actually intend for this teaching to be put into practice over such small things, and “they have good reasons, as you shall see.”¹⁰³ The narrator interjects with a Pascalian hermeneutic: “I know what [this reason] will be, of course—because the law of God

⁹⁷ *POC 1*, 637.

⁹⁸ *POC 1*, 648.

⁹⁹ *POC 1*, 650.

¹⁰⁰ *POC 1*, 655.

¹⁰¹ *POC 1*, 655.

¹⁰² *POC 1*, 655.

¹⁰³ *POC 1*, 655.

forbids killing.”¹⁰⁴ But this is not at all the reasoning the Jesuits have in mind. Instead, Lessius argues that if every small insult was met with violence, it would simply lead to “too large a number of deaths” and this would be “detrimental to the State.”¹⁰⁵

Here we have the sharper hermeneutical contrast. The Jesuit reading finds its limit not when it finally runs up against the verdict of scripture, but when its implementation begins to interfere with an even more powerful interest which the theologian does not want to offend. Pascal intends to read scripture in a way that makes limits immediately evident, in a way that objects to what seems culturally or intuitively obvious. The assumption is thus not that the ‘obvious’ interpretation of scripture is always the right one, but that the reading of scripture which gives one pause, which causes one to contemplate whether one is actually wrong, is the correct point of entry from which to being understanding the will of God. As we finally turn to the *Pensées*, this notion of drawing close to God by drawing close to the falseness of one’s representations will prove helpful.

2.4.2 Observations

When reading the *Lettres provinciales*, it is easy to become overwhelmed by the level of detail and the particulars of debates now long-forgotten. In the bigger picture, however, two major concerns arise in Pascal’s mind which provide the background to the *Pensées*. The first is what William Wood calls Pascal’s notion of “morally culpable self-persuasion.”¹⁰⁶ Humans are enormously self-serving, and easily able to convince themselves of their own rightness, even when they are not. Religious people are not immune to this habit; Christians are not immune, not even bishops and theologians are immune. Too much theological reasoning starts with a presumption in favor of the church’s—or the theologian’s—axiomatic rightness.

The second problem is that language easily adapts to this human habit, even—perhaps especially—when it is traditional theological language. At least within the sphere of pure representations, there is no analogical connection to God strong enough to withstand the possibility of misinterpretation. It is the problem of ideology with a theological gloss or, more accurately, ideology is the secular gloss to an intimately theological problem. Ever since Adam Eve and

¹⁰⁴ *POC I*, 655.

¹⁰⁵ *POC I*, 655.

¹⁰⁶ William Wood, *Blaise Pascal on Duplicity, Sin, and the Fall: The Secret Instinct* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013), 179.

wondered whether more favorable meanings could be constructed from the words ‘eat’ and ‘die,’ theology has had a language problem.

Discipleship thus begins to form in Pascal’s mind as the location where these two problems are contested. The call of God on the life of the disciple is marked first by contradiction, by *metanoia*, by the admonition that one must change directions and follow a new path. This subversion of self becomes the starting point for thinking properly about knowledge. And the life which follows after—itself a following after Christ—is the intersection of the will of God and the concrete ethical choices facing the human. Only at this intersection is there an analogical bridge which permits true representations of God. And so the demand to obey God sacrificially becomes not only a freedom to finally think as a human, but also the freedom to speak about God.

2.5 The Particularity of Lived Existence and the Reason of the *Pensées*

2.5.1 Data from the primary sources

The *Pensées* are—at least for those interested in the philosophical and theological aspects of his thought—Pascal’s most well-known work. They are a collection of writings which were mainly set down over 1657-8, in the immediate aftermath of the debate recorded in the *Lettres provinciales*. As best we can tell, Pascal continued to fiddle with the text, adding more thoughts over the next few years until his death in 1662. There is, however, a certain biographical mystery surrounding the *Pensées*, since what little Pascal told his family about the work during these five years gave them the impression that he was continuing to write a definitive and magisterial “apology for the Christian religion.”¹⁰⁷ To their surprise, when he passed away, they discovered nothing remotely resembling a manuscript, but instead “a mass of papers,” completely unorganized, but out of which one could discern that the “the majority of them could only have been amassed with *l’Apologie* in mind.”¹⁰⁸ For this reason, Michel Le Guern writes, quite accurately, “The *Pensées* are the papers of a dead man. Not a posthumous book.”¹⁰⁹ The later recollections of the family surrounding the discovery of the papers are tinged by what Le Guern calls “a prevailing feeling of overwhelming disappointment.”¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ *POC* 2, 1296.

¹⁰⁸ *POC* 2, 1297.

¹⁰⁹ *POC* 2, 1296.

¹¹⁰ *POC* 2, 1296.

There was no hidden masterpiece ready for printing, no book in final form simply waiting to be bound. But the family, as best they could, collected papers that seemed roughly unified by their interest in apologetics, and prepared them for publication.¹¹¹ Modern scholars of the *Pensées* work from three sources—the original documents, and two handwritten copies which were arranged into the sequence we know today, probably by Pascal’s brother, Gilberte.¹¹² Whether this sequence represents in any way Pascal’s original intent is unknown. Frankly, it is unclear whether Pascal’s work ever advanced far enough that he had any particular structure in mind for the array of fragmentary thoughts and notes which became the *Pensées*.

Pascal was by no means constitutionally unable to put together a publishable manuscript, indeed, his family found among his papers a few complete monographs on geometry and physics. Why, then, did Pascal come no closer to completing his apologetic work? Why did he seem to nearly abandon it after 1658? There is no definitive answer, except to note—as his biographer Hugh Davidson does—that after the principal phase of writing the *Pensées*, Pascal entered into “an intense spiritual regime” leading up to his death in 1662.¹¹³ He spent this time studying Scripture “until he all but knew it by heart,” visiting the poor, participating in devotions, and seeking “to rid himself of pride.”¹¹⁴ On a practical level, this slowed his academic output. But it is worth keeping in mind this pietistic phase as we explore the texts of the *Pensées*, because this thesis contends that, to the extent that one can distinguish a central argument to the *Pensées*, it may well be intimately related to the final years of Pascal’s life, and even his decision to abandon writing almost entirely.

There is no self-evident starting point for discussing the *Pensées*, but we will begin with the broadest and most fundamental of Pascal’s claims. “God,” he writes, “is a hidden God.”¹¹⁵ This must be so because of “the corruption of nature.”¹¹⁶ In our sinful state, God “has left men in a darkness from which they can escape only through Jesus Christ.”¹¹⁷ This darkness is ethical, emotional, existential, and intellectual at once; it is a sign for the “human ego” inclined “to

¹¹¹ *POC* 2, 1297.

¹¹² *POC* 2, 1304.

¹¹³ Davidson, *Blaise Pascal*, 21.

¹¹⁴ Davidson, *Blaise Pascal*, 21.

¹¹⁵ *POC* 2, 975.

¹¹⁶ *POC* 2, 975.

¹¹⁷ *POC* 2, 975.

love self only” that “he cannot prevent this object that he loves from being full of faults and wants.”¹¹⁸

The intellectual side of our darkness is manifest in the frequent errors and misunderstandings which are endemic to our very way of thinking. We are prone to bias, unable to see past artifice. We cannot listen seriously to an opinion if it comes from an unexpected source. “However great the truth” an orator proclaims, give “him a hoarse voice or a comical cast of countenance, or let his barber have given him a bad shave” and watch as “our senator loses his gravity.”¹¹⁹ Our emotional state sways us, our survival instinct focuses on the most pressing rather than the most true information. Put “the greatest philosopher in the world . . . upon a plank wider than actually necessary, but hanging over a precipice” and watch the great mind tremble, “though his reason convince him of his safety.”¹²⁰ The weight of authority and expectation sneakily bends our thoughts towards conformity; “we cannot even see an advocate in his robe and with his cap on his head, without a favourable opinion of his ability.”¹²¹ New ideas sway with us with nothing more than “the charms of novelty.”¹²² We are shamelessly agreeable to arguments which lead to our own advantage, which reinforce our opinions, which prove our assumptions right, and so even “the justest man in the world is not allowed to be judge in his own cause.”¹²³ Our very bodies betray us, our minds can become muddled, our senses less acute, our judgments less rigorous.¹²⁴ We are habitual distorters of the truth habitually beset by distortions. At all points, “these two sources of truth, reason and the senses, besides being both wanting in sincerity, deceive each other in turn.”¹²⁵

Anyone familiar with contemporary psychological research on outcome effects, confirmation bias, heuristic shortcuts, framing effects, sunk cost fallacies, anchoring, hindsight, selective perception, empathy gaps and more, will recognize at least some merit to Pascal’s claim that humans are consistently more irrational than we like to believe. To put the argument in this way, however, is to make a kind of empirical case—a rational examination of the data on causal

¹¹⁸ *POC* 2, 892.

¹¹⁹ *POC* 2, 552.

¹²⁰ *POC* 2, 552.

¹²¹ *POC* 2, 554.

¹²² *POC* 2, 554.

¹²³ *POC* 2, 555.

¹²⁴ *POC* 2, 554.

¹²⁵ *POC* 2, 555.

chains of behavior proves that we are irrational. Pascal's critique runs deeper, problematizing even the kind of empirical observation which could ground his argument. Empiricism finds itself transcended within and without by a "double infinity."¹²⁶ Consider, on the one hand, "the whole of nature in her full and grand majesty," measure "the vast circumference of the earth's revolution, then "wonder at the fact that this vast circle is itself but a very fine point."¹²⁷ Extrapolate even beyond this expanse to "an infinite sphere,"¹²⁸ such that even when we "enlarge our conceptions beyond an imaginable space; we only produce atoms in comparison with the reality of things."¹²⁹ Conversely, "examine the most delicate things . . . a mite . . . with its minute body parts and parts more incomparably minute."¹³⁰ Divide and divide, reduce things to their constituent parts, split atoms, observe superpositions, presume to find "the smallest point in nature."¹³¹ What you will find, Pascal argues, is merely "a new abyss . . . an infinity of universes."¹³² Suspended "between the two abysses of the infinite and nothingness,"¹³³ between the infinitely encompassing and the infinitely vanishing, the empiricist finds herself "infinitely removed from comprehending the extremes."¹³⁴

Significantly, this argument that empiricism finds itself transcended by its own object should not be read as merely a problem of scale. It is, in Pascal's understanding, a problem of truly grasping causality, and thus a limitation embedded in the powers of observation. If both "the end of things and their beginning are hopelessly hidden . . . in an impenetrable secret," then all our observation occurs only "of the middle of things," and thus in "eternal despair of knowing either their beginning or their end."¹³⁵ It is a problem of attempting to reach infinity by increments, of steadily sequencing the causal chain only to find it infinitely regressing into the past, with each link connected by infinitely smaller constituent links. If "all is held together by a natural though imperceptible chain . . . I hold it equally impossible to know the parts without knowing the whole and to know the whole without knowing the parts in detail."¹³⁶ The empiricist, Pascal argues, will never reach the point of being convincingly unable to ask about the

¹²⁶ *POC* 2, 610.

¹²⁷ *POC* 2, 608.

¹²⁸ *POC* 2, 609.

¹²⁹ *POC* 2, 608-9.

¹³⁰ *POC* 2, 609.

¹³¹ *POC* 2, 609.

¹³² *POC* 2, 609.

¹³³ *POC* 2, 609.

¹³⁴ *POC* 2, 610.

¹³⁵ *POC* 2, 610.

¹³⁶ *POC* 2, 613.

beginning which preceded the beginning, or about the movement of the part which makes possible the movement of the whole. The empiricist “is equally incapable of seeing the Nothing from which he was made, and the Infinite in which he is swallowed up.”¹³⁷ And, truly, despite the enormous advances in understanding made at both the cosmological and the quantum level since Pascal’s time, it remains difficult to say that his intuition is wrong, to demonstrate that we are currently any closer to answers which appear ever receding, to the point where our mathematical constructs of what happens at the largest and smallest scales only make sense with the advent of even further multiverses and dimensional strings standing—by definition—beyond our observational grasp.

Limitations are one thing, but awareness of limitations, in Pascal’s argument, are less reached than imposed. Humanity knows itself as finite not organically, not through its own strength failing, but when it finds its authority surmounted by divine strength. This presents a unique starting point for the experience of divine call, which is not first the awareness of God but the awareness of human incapacity. It is therefore an experience, so to speak, but only as the non-experience, the comprehension that all supposed comprehensions are suspect. Blindness is a part of our condition, but the critical awareness of blindness is a unique grace, an epiphanic opening into the distrust of self.

This negative revelation, for Pascal, can be nothing other than “Jesus Christ,” the “end of all, and the centre to which all tends.”¹³⁸ If we could truly see him in glory, we would know “the reason of everything.”¹³⁹ But to know him in our fallen state is simultaneously to become aware of our incapacities, our unlikeness to God even at the moment of God’s greatest likeness to us—“we cannot know Jesus Christ without knowing at the same time both God and our own wretchedness.”¹⁴⁰ For Pascal, the experience of God is not an admission that experience is epistemically prior, it is the undoing of experience, the undoing of all priors. In one of the most poignant passages in the *Pensées*, Pascal describes this condition after encounter:

I know not who put me into the world, nor what the world is, nor what I myself am. I am in terrible ignorance of everything. I know not what my body is, nor

¹³⁷ *POC* 2, 610.

¹³⁸ *POC* 2, 697.

¹³⁹ *POC* 2, 697.

¹⁴⁰ *POC* 2, 698.

my senses, nor my soul, not even that part of me which thinks what I say, which reflects on all and on itself, and knows itself no more than the rest. . . I see nothing but infinites on all sides, which surround me as an atom and as a shadow which endures only for an instant and returns no more. All I know is that I must soon die, but what I know least is this very death which I cannot escape.¹⁴¹

The grace of this desolation, however, does not make one a Christian. It does not even guarantee the restless pursuit of consolation. Pascal imagines a generic agnosticism which admits to unknowing—while at the same time holding out the possibility that there “is some solution”—but “will not take the trouble” to seek a solution and even “treat[s] with scorn those who are concerned with this care.”¹⁴² For these, Pascal reserves his greatest contempt. “Who would desire to have for a friend a man who talks in this fashion? . . . Who would have recourse to him in affliction?”¹⁴³ There is a moral failing, for Pascal, in refusing to admit—or else admitting but refusing to engage in—the ongoing *Anfechtung* of existence. This refusal only serves to reinforce the first fact of the Christian claim, “the corruption of nature.”¹⁴⁴ The Christian confession is that this true *metanoia*, this true disruption of the mind’s course, is a grace. There is nothing about it alone which obviously presents the Triune God as its source, yet it is neither desirable nor entirely possible to abstain from living in relation to the questions it raises. “Let them at least be honest men,” Pascal mutters, “if they cannot be Christians.”¹⁴⁵

Suppose, however, that after ignorance, one still chooses to wrestle, to seek out an answer. There is further grace made available to us after the grace of unknowing, some positive revelation of God’s will and intent. But the form of this grace fundamentally alters not only what it means to live with the knowledge of it, but alters the very idea of knowing it in the first place.

To explain this, let us return for a moment to the wager, to consider where Pascal’s argument leads us so far. Given the problems afflicting our rationality, arguments sustained by what we take to be the normal tools of reason lead us in various directions at once. The atheist insists, “we have no light,”¹⁴⁶ we are adrift, baseless, we cannot see the divine light which ought to

¹⁴¹ *POC* 2, 683-4.

¹⁴² *POC* 2, 684.

¹⁴³ *POC* 2, 684.

¹⁴⁴ *POC* 2, 684.

¹⁴⁵ *POC* 2, 686.

¹⁴⁶ *POC* 2, 625.

prove the Christian case so clearly. Which Pascal takes to be less an argument against Christianity than the entire point of our *hamartia*. Following our so-called reasoning:

“it is incomprehensible that God should exist, and it is incomprehensible that He should not exist; that the soul should be joined to the body, and that we should have no soul; that the world should be created, and that it should not be created.”¹⁴⁷

Left to the devices of mere theorising, the arguments will pile up on either side, “you can do neither the one thing nor the other; according to reason, you can defend neither of the propositions.”¹⁴⁸ And so we are mistaken if we believe that the wager is an argument that there are good reasons to cast your lot with Christian belief. Instead, supposedly good reasoning, in its arid deductions, has left us bereft. And yet, here we are, living. The wager is already made, Pascal argues, the die is cast—“It is not optional. You are embarked.”¹⁴⁹

Pascal’s argument may thus sound like a very early brand of postfoundationalism—no perspective can be proven beyond doubt, but you are bound to still pick one. What is more compelling, however, is the way that Pascal takes the wager to lead not to Christian belief, but to discipleship, and discipleship not as an alternative to believing, but as the route to belief. The reasonableness of Christian life is its shape, is its being lived. It cannot be demonstrated by casting about for more information, tighter proofs, deeper origins. And yet, for Pascal, this is not to say that there is no reason or proof, but that the taking shape of the Christian disciple is the only thing that could count as proof.

The origin of this argument is a rather startling claim for Pascal’s day, “*nous sommes automate autant qu’esprit*”¹⁵⁰—we are as much automatons as intellects. “All our reasoning reduces itself to yielding to feeling.”¹⁵¹ It is difficult not to read into this claim implications for present-day debates about consciousness and theories of mind, but to do so would be anachronistic. Instead, Pascal’s concern is with the inadequacy of theorising itself, that even “though a man

¹⁴⁷ *POC* 2, 816.

¹⁴⁸ *POC* 2, 677.

¹⁴⁹ *POC* 2, 677.

¹⁵⁰ *POC* 2, 818.

¹⁵¹ *POC* 2, 748.

should be convinced that numerical proportions are . . . dependent on a first truth . . . which is called God, I should not think him far advanced towards his own salvation.”¹⁵² We are fooling ourselves if we believe we are sufficiently rational as to be genuinely swayed by arguments for or against the existence of God—“the instrument by which conviction is attained is not demonstrated alone.”¹⁵³

Instead, we are equally as much shaped by what Pascal calls “*coutume*,”¹⁵⁴—custom, though we would be mistaken to understand ‘*coutume*’ in Pascal’s usage principally at the cultural or societal level. Pascal does not define the term, but seems to mean something like the repetition of a daily life, the choices made in living that are nearly below the level of conscious choice at all. Even if “the mind has seen where the truth is,” the way of actual lived existence must lead us truly.¹⁵⁵ Our conceptual knowledge, however profound, is difficult to keep at the forefront of our attention. It “escapes us at every hour,” and something else must “quench our thirst,” must do the actual work of “steeping ourselves in that belief.”¹⁵⁶ *Coutume* is not unrelated to “*le sentiment*,”¹⁵⁷ which marshals our actual activity, which displays our trueness quite apart from our belief, because our principles are never fully “present.”¹⁵⁸ Customs, not rationales, are “the source of our strongest and most believed proofs.”¹⁵⁹ And so it is not the case that proof is irrelevant to Christian reasoning, but that what is called proof only emerges in the course of living. This, Pascal takes to be a middle way between “two extremes: to exclude reason, to admit reason only.”¹⁶⁰ Pascal’s approach to rationality is not to dismiss it, but to suggest that already, by its nature, it is far more the end result of living than its grounds. This is the divergence between Pascal and most forms of postfoundationalism. He is not arguing that various rationally equivalent theories are equally valid for ordering one’s life around, he is arguing that you have never, from birth, despite your intellect, ordered your life entirely around a theory. Yet, this does not thereby make you irrational.

¹⁵² *POC* 2, 698.

¹⁵³ *POC* 2, 818.

¹⁵⁴ *POC* 2, 818.

¹⁵⁵ *POC* 2, 819.

¹⁵⁶ *POC* 2, 819.

¹⁵⁷ *POC* 2, 819.

¹⁵⁸ *POC* 2, 819.

¹⁵⁹ *POC* 2, 818.

¹⁶⁰ *POC* 2, 604.

Here, we come as close as we can to finding something like the wager as it is popularly understood. It scans as follows. Set out in the way of discipleship. “Endeavour, then, to convince yourself, not by increase of proofs of God, but by the abatement of your passions . . . Learn of those who have been bound like you, and who now stake all their possessions . . . Follow the way by which they began.”¹⁶¹ At worst, even if you cannot be convinced of Christian belief, you will have taken up the customs that shape you to “be faithful, humble, grateful, generous, a sincere friend, truthful.”¹⁶² At best, along this way, “at each step you take on this road,” when you find the “great certainty of gain” contrasted with “so much nothingness in what you risk,” you will finally attain to something “certain and infinite.”¹⁶³

2.5.2 Observations

Rather than compelling belief via self-interest, the force of Pascal’s wager is only properly understood if one has passed through the movement of his thought leading up to the *infini/rien*. In context, the wager is not an appeal to bare reason but a critique of bare reason. The abolition of objectivity, in Pascal’s case, does not take the form of a proto-postmodern overthrow of the supreme subject, but takes the form of critiquing reason’s media, suggesting that we do not really understand what we mean when we talk about rationality, and that the pre-condition for what can positively constitute rationality is the recognition of this dislocation. It is Pascal’s understanding of our epistemic condition, and the relation of our epistemic condition to both Christ and the life of the disciple which is relevant for our purposes.

Pascal’s discussion of human limits functions on two levels. There is first a claim—hard to dispute—that human beings are finite. Whether this finitude is itself an evil or is actually human existence as God intended is a separate debate. Pascal’s concern is humanity’s persistent unwillingness to acknowledge its finitude. The forms of intellectual, volitional, emotional, and structural darkness in the world “rather do us good” because they create the opportunity for us to be made aware of the real source of sin, “namely, the ignorance of these imperfections.”¹⁶⁴ But this transition, from mere futility to an awareness and acknowledgement of our futility, is critically important to Pascal.

¹⁶¹ *POC* 2, 679.

¹⁶² *POC* 2, 680.

¹⁶³ *POC* 2, 681.

¹⁶⁴ *POC* 2, 893.

Therefore, the wager is not between an abstract calculation for projecting the possibilities of heaven and hell, or even a good life and a bad life. It is a question about which direction the actual customs of concrete living will bend life towards. Christianity, in Pascal's understanding, speaks precisely to the condition of our unknowing and the limitations of our abstraction. It does so by giving us divine speech in the form of a human life, a human life which the disciple is called to enter into as well. "All who seek God without Jesus Christ . . . find no light to satisfy them," but the God of Christ does not emanate abstractions, but is "a God who fills the soul and heart of those whom He possesses . . . who unites Himself to their inmost soul . . . who renders them incapable of any other end than Himself."¹⁶⁵ The call to follow Christ is an invitation to live dependently, to be transformed at the level of custom, and only later to find rational the beliefs of the Christian confession. In the words of Thomas Morris, Pascal "attempts to show that, in light of the ultimate questions, we ought to adopt a certain kind of strategy for living."¹⁶⁶

Few register Pascal's contribution more accurately than the philosopher, Charles Natoli:

The stock and trade of the philosopher is to judge of views by their reasonableness. Traditionally, this has meant to hale them before an objective, impartial tribunal competent to hear all cases and to pronounce definitively upon them. . . . A look at Pascal on proof . . . suggests that, at bottom, reason is a kind of rhetoric, a power that persuades us; that at times it persuades us irresistibly, as in the case of self-evident first principles; that, when all is said and done, we find rational argument to be probative, not merely because it observes certain formal rules, but because the observance of these rules invincibly convinces us of the truth of what follows from them; and that we cannot but account to be proof those things that do in fact convince us.¹⁶⁷

Another way to express the implication of reason as 'a kind of rhetoric' is to suggest that a theology which arises from the reasoning of discipleship must return itself to the rhetorical function of the Greek *logos* which Christian thought has appropriated. The emphasis here is

¹⁶⁵ *POC* 2, 698.

¹⁶⁶ Thomas V. Morris, "Wagering and the Evidence," in *Gambling on God: Essays on Pascal's Wager*, ed. Jeff Jordan (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1994): 47-60, on p. 48.

¹⁶⁷ Charles M. Natoli, "Proof in the *Pensées*: Reason as Rhetoric, Rhetoric as Reason," in *Fire in the Dark: Essays on Pascal's Pensées and Provinciales* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2005): 69-95, on p. 90.

not on *logos* as noun—as the eternal truth accessible to the penetrating mind—but as verb, as address, as reason in its original connotations within the Greek oratorical tradition, as an activity, however discursive, as the ‘reason’ of the old King James translation of Isaiah 1:18, “Come now, and let us reason together.” Such an understanding restores the primacy of the Second Person of the Trinity in its relation to the divine *Logos*—it is not Christ whose nature is to manifest Truth, but truth which is a description of that form of life which is Christ’s, that ‘*coutume*’ which can be trusted to lead towards God.

The alternative to human rationality which the *Pensées* presents is not necessarily irrationality, but a different venue in which something that can properly be called rationality arises. The origin of discipleship as theological prolegomenon does not overthrow the possibility of the pursuit of trueness, graced at every step. It does unmask human faith in the god, Truth, to which its own self-declared ‘rationality’ is ordered, and demands that reasoning be ordered after the appearance of the God who is true. And this, consequently, alters our understanding of grace, severing it from a casual equivalence with illumination, with the in-breaking of Truth. In its place, we have the grace of the life of Christ, in all the gritty specificity of its routines, habits, and relations. The attempt to live into this life is not the realm in which grace can be applied, it is grace itself. To reason truly is to accept the conclusions which emerge through this living, it is therefore more the product than the pre-condition of truth.

This framing of the central thesis of the *Pensées* renders all the more poignant Pascal’s decision not to complete its writing. Instead, the last few years of his life increasingly took the shape of exactly what he advocated, a whole-hearted devotion to God which could only serve as its own ground of reason. Perhaps he would have returned to complete a book on the subject had he survived into old age, but for a time, it seems, his manner of life was the only argument he intended to make.

2.6 Discussion

The history of Protestant and Catholic debate has too often been reduced to each side accusing the other of semi-pelagianism. Catholics accuse Protestants of restricting grace from the sphere of nature entirely; Protestants accuse Catholics of making works a necessary condition for justification. What Pascal’s idiosyncratic Jansenism offers is a kind of middle path. The priority

of God's call to discipleship belongs to God and can only begin with God. It complicates, on the one hand, the idea that human action is an entirely 'immanent' sphere, that the work of the human is necessarily different from the location of God's self-disclosure. It complicates, on the other hand, the idea that God's self-disclosure thereby abides in the human subject in a way that can be known by reason as we typically understand it.

Pascal's notion of 'the movement of love' gives a hint of this middle ground. It suggests on the one hand that divine activity is something which the human person's own life can be caught up into as well, by virtue of its conformity to divine movement. It suggests, at the same time, that because divine self-disclosure is resolved as movement, that there can be no breaking up of either anthropology or divine activity into entirely discrete moments. Consequently, there is no way to speak of divine grace affecting a human at one moment, thus freeing the human to enter the next moment independently empowered for righteousness. There can be no clear differentiation of moments, but a continuous flow which merges or diverges from the activity of God. In these moments of merging, we can speak of the righteousness of human action, without thereby crediting the human in any way.

To speak about divine self-disclosure in terms of 'movement,' however, complicates the understanding of human intelligence as a causal chain of thought resolving into decision and then into action. This linguistic sequence, in which action is born of a prior representation, is one to which theology—itsself a linguistic enterprise—is deeply indebted. But Pascal's understanding creates problems for this linguistic sequence. Action is already occurring even as representations are being formed. Theological language—even traditional theological language—is presently being formed as part of one action or another. Without this action itself being grounded in fidelity to God, then there is no virtue to simply asserting the truth of the words, to proclaiming allegiance to mere 'sounds.'

Discipleship forms a new basis, in Pascal's thought, for an approach to theological reasoning. The call in which discipleship originates is God surmounting the insulated sphere of human thought. The life which emerges in response is the possibility of both a human merging with the activity of the divine and a grounds of fidelity to God from which language can be properly spoken. The closest that Pascal comes to defining discipleship is in a passage from the ninth *lettre provinciale*. The priest quotes for the narrator from a passage of the Jesuit Pierre Le Moyne, who describes a man that:

delights in the trunk of a tree or grotto rather than a palace or throne. As far as affronts or injuries, he is as insensible to them as one who has the eyes and ears of a statue. Honor and glory are idols with whom he has no acquaintance, and to whom he has no incense to offer. A beautiful person is, to him, a ghost, and those imperial and commanding looks—those charming tyrants who hold so many slaves in willing and chainless servitude—have no more influence over his eyes than the sun over the owls.¹⁶⁸

For the narrator, this sounds like the very definition of a disciple, a veritable “saint,” one who has turned their whole life over to God.¹⁶⁹ But for Le Moyne, “these are the traits of a weak and savage mind, lacking virtuous and natural affections.”¹⁷⁰

This is as close as we come to both a definition of discipleship and a clearer picture of its epistemic effects. The disciple is one who hears the call of God and leaves everything to obey. This makes the disciple sensitive to the movement of love alone. But it is implicitly a challenge to a classical understanding of the shape of a rational intellect, one which has cultivated the aesthetic, political, and practical sensibilities of life in the world.

For Pascal, the insensitivity of the disciple to ‘charm,’ to ‘flattery,’ to a self-evident and assured path for advance in the world, is a sign of a holy ignorance. It is the deconstruction of a variety of illusory ideologies. These illusions are endemic to the world of representations, and this is what can give Pascal the appearance, at first glance, of being an irrationalist. If reason is taken to be a confidence that knowledge can be deduced from within the appearance of the world as we represent it to ourselves and each other, then the disciple has no time for such ‘rationality.’ But there is a different way to speak about reason, a way that is not only faithful to God, but more honest about the way in which our intellects actually function, as humans already acting as we are forming conceptions, acting in ways that forestall our perfect objectivity, acting in ways which our conceptions only subsequently attempt to justify.

¹⁶⁸ *POC 1*, 676.

¹⁶⁹ *POC 1*, 676.

¹⁷⁰ *POC 1*, 676.

2.7 Conclusion

The unfinished, fragmentary and occasionally cryptic form of Pascal's work leaves us with phrases and insights which are hard to locate with respect to any sense of the work as a whole. Such is Pascal's mention of "a letter to incite to the search after God."¹⁷¹ It is difficult to know whether this represents a note Pascal left for himself to which he never returned, or a description of a particular section of the *Pensées*, or perhaps even a statement of purpose for Pascal's entire writing project late in life. Only one additional line accompanies this phrase, below it: "And then to make people seek Him among the philosophers, sceptics, and dogmatists, who disquiet him who inquires of them."¹⁷² My inclination is to take this in the broadest sense, as a kind of motto for Pascal's life. But either way, Pascal's casual hint is worth more consideration. Introduce the skeptics to the dogmatists, the dogmatists to the skeptics, let the laypeople read the philosophers, let the scholars read devotions. Each will serve its purpose—not because each contains some portion of a larger Truth—but when it is used by the Spirit to deeply disquiet, when it is thereby the approach of God. To explore the implications of this budding insight, we turn to another Christian thinker profoundly interested in being disquieted and disquieting, and interested in what language can and can't do in this process.

¹⁷¹ *POC* 2, 544.

¹⁷² *POC* 2, 544.

Chapter 3

Søren Kierkegaard and the Nature of Dialectical Movement in Christian Thought

3.1 Introduction

While Blaise Pascal offered a preliminary account of the epistemic implications of discipleship, the work of Søren Kierkegaard will prove useful for granting a deeper, philosophical, christo-centric basis to Pascal's scattered insights. Pascal, intimately caught up in the particulars of intra-Catholic debate, struggled to offer more than a word of a caution to human reason. Kierkegaard supplements this caution by locating it within a larger philosophical framework about the nature of human consciousness in post-Hegelian debate. Within the scope of this thesis, Kierkegaard's work serves as a kind of bridge, connecting Pascal's brand of Jansenist skepticism to its Lutheran christological roots, which will then prepare us for a more detailed account of reason after discipleship in chapter four, when we consider the work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

The sketch of Kierkegaard's work presented here intends to focus on three insights most relevant to the epistemic implications of beginning theology with discipleship. The first is the notion that discipleship contests the innate representations of human consciousness. The second is related: that discipleship—in placing God and concrete reality on the same side of a spectrum opposing human illusion—contests even religious representations. The third is that something other than representation, and thus other than language, must form the foundational rubric for true knowledge which follows after discipleship. This chapter will approach these insights from the vantage of trying to discern the nature of a Kierkegaardian 'dialectic'. If, in Kierkegaard's mind, much like Hegel's, human appropriation of the truth is being contested and subverted over and over again, then in what sense can we say that Kierkegaard also resolves this tension

dialectically? What are the terms of this dialectic, the poles between which human thought moves? What are the features of dialectical thought which Kierkegaard embraces or rejects?¹

3.2 Background

The work of Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) is easy to misconstrue. In part, this is due to the peculiarity of the man, the difficulty of putting oneself inside the mind of a brilliant, eccentric, unmarried, orphaned young man, unrestrained by either the need to earn a living or by membership in any particular civil, academic, or ecclesial institution. Kierkegaard believed himself to have been, from birth, “wedded to God.”² While this imagery often served for medieval mystics to suggest the ecstatic joy of loving nearness, for Kierkegaard, it was also tinged with the helplessness of possession, an Old Testament prophet’s sensibility that the whole of his life was bound to a weighty but not entirely welcome task. Taken as a whole, then, his corpus is unique in being largely unsystematic in one sense while at the time forming a whole, such that the individual pieces cannot be fully appreciated independently.

Kierkegaard studied theology and philosophy at the University of Copenhagen and was awarded a masters degree in 1841 for his thesis, *The Concept of Irony*. After finishing the degree, he spent the rest of his life in Copenhagen as an independent writer, living off of an inheritance from his deceased father. Much in parallel to Pascal, Kierkegaard was an independent thinker, a sickly child who died early in adulthood, a writer with a humorist’s wryness, a satirist’s inventiveness, and a polymath’s complexity, and a man convinced of a divine mandate to defend Christianity from Christians. And for Kierkegaard, as for Pascal, this defense of the true nature of the Christian life necessarily brought him into an ongoing dispute with the hierarchy of his own church which dominated the later years of his life.

The superficial division in Kierkegaard’s work is between more confessional writings dealing with Christian and church life and the more philosophical pseudonymical writings, the latter itself being divided into two separate phases of authorship. Scholars have differed about the

¹ All of the translations in this chapter are taken, with gratitude, from the masterful 25-volume translation of *Kierkegaard’s Writings* published by Princeton University Press under the general editorship of Howard and Edna Hong.

² Joakim Garff, *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*, trans. Bruce H. Kirmmse (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2005), 191. The biographical details mentioned in this chapter are largely indebted to Garff’s comprehensive biography, the original Danish version of which was published in 2000.

best way to understand the relation between these two fields of interest, and the best way to understand the relation between Kierkegaard's own views and the views presented by the various 'characters' who author his works. The interpretative position which will unfold over this chapter largely agrees with the approach suggested by Stephen Evans. He has argued for the basic "unity" in Kierkegaard's works of "an overall religious purpose,"³ the only defense of which is that "looking at the literature in this way illuminates it in a powerful manner."⁴ No deeper hermeneutical claim will be made than this—that if one takes Kierkegaard's defense of Christian piety to be a major concern, then the details of his philosophical approach begin to resolve into greater clarity. Thus, this chapter will consider a number of disparate works by Kierkegaard, attempting to unify them only by the illumination they offer to the question of reason which follows after discipleship.

3.3 Review of the Literature on a Kierkegaardian Dialectic

In considering Kierkegaard's influence on the question of reason after discipleship, we are bringing together two streams of literature on his legacy. The first stream concerns Kierkegaard's understanding of human reason, particularly in relation to the common complaint that Kierkegaard is "a fideist . . . an irrationalist . . . so concerned with passion at the expense of reason that . . . there is virtually no positive role for reason to play in making the 'leap of faith.'"⁵ This first stream is not unrelated to the second, which is the influence of pietistic strains of Lutheranism on Kierkegaard's life and thought. Indeed, it may well be the case that discerning Kierkegaard's approach to human reason is also a matter of discerning the effect of Luther's legacy as a theologian "not known for an appreciative approach to natural theology and natural reason."⁶ The alternative to understanding Kierkegaard as a pure fideist is to attempt to make something out of his dialectical understanding of the relation between individual human existence and truth. The nature of this dialectic, however, is also subject to Kierkegaard's understanding of the disciple's relationship to God, as we shall see.

³ C. Stephen Evans, *Passionate Reason: Making Sense of Kierkegaard's Philosophical Fragments* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1992), 4.

⁴ Evans, *Passionate Reason*, 5.

⁵ Jack Mulder, Jr., *Kierkegaard and the Catholic Tradition: Conflict and Dialogue* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 2010), 13.

⁶ Mulder, *Kierkegaard and the Catholic Tradition*, 15.

Let us consider, as one early example of defining a ‘Kierkegaardian dialectic,’ the habilitation of Theodor Adorno. In Adorno’s reading, ‘dialectics’ signifies for Kierkegaard “the movement that subjectivity completes both out of itself and in itself to regain ‘meaning.’”⁷ In taking up these terms, Adorno helpfully orients us towards two notions significant in understanding Kierkegaard—the notion of ‘subjectivity’ and the priority of an encounter or ‘moment’ which generates ‘movement’. But Adorno reads Kierkegaard’s usage of these terms as purely existential, as the private, psychological quest for ‘meaning.’ Adorno’s assumption is that the Lutheran legacy in Kierkegaard’s work is the *sola scriptura* by which the radical alterity of God becomes accessible. The divine sphere, the realm of true meaning, the Absolute, is “invariable” and “unchangeable.”⁸ But the remoteness of the impassable God is translatable to humanity insofar as scripture serves as “a cipher,”⁹ but uniquely, being “not merely a sign but expression.”¹⁰ The media of revelation does not merely speak about the Absolute, but is a token of absoluteness, and so “paradoxically, the absolutely hidden is communicated by the cipher.”¹¹ Operative in the background of Kierkegaard’s own dialectic is this paradox, that the only approach which the human can make to true meaning is via the interrogation of the cipher, which is both disclosing and obscuring the Absolute itself.

In Adorno’s reading, the uniqueness of Kierkegaard’s own brand of Lutheran dialectic is that, in place of scripture, it permits the personal, psychological, existential experience of the individual to serve as cipher for the divine. The place in which meaning is disclosed is thus “a middle realm that presents itself in the ‘affects’.”¹² This creates a deep “antinomy” in Kierkegaard’s thought, as he “conceives of meaning . . . contradictorily, as radically devolved upon the ‘I,’ as purely immanent to the subject and, at the same time, as renounced and unreachable transcendence.”¹³ Here we have a preliminary version of a Kierkegaardian dialectic. Thought is restlessly pursuing meaning via self-reflection. The constant subversion it finds there—in the cipher that it is its own existential longing—is an undoing of itself, but this relentless motion also *is* itself. The subject is subverted in its fleeting encounter with Absoluteness at the

⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, trans. and ed. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minneapolis Press, 1989), 30.

⁸ Adorno, *Kierkegaard*, 25.

⁹ Adorno, *Kierkegaard*, 25.

¹⁰ Adorno, *Kierkegaard*, 26.

¹¹ Adorno, *Kierkegaard*, 26.

¹² Adorno, *Kierkegaard*, 26.

¹³ Adorno, *Kierkegaard*, 27.

same time that the subject is created as free and able to decide for itself. “Free, active subjectivity is . . . the bearer of all reality.”¹⁴ The resolution of thought’s problem is to discover that its dialectical movement is its meaning, “what is sought was in the search itself.”¹⁵

For Adorno, Kierkegaard is thus one version of a Hegelian idealist, though poorer for his lack of any concrete historicity which can challenge subjectivity. The Kierkegaardian dialectic becomes a grimmer Fichteanism, for “where Fichte’s idealism springs and develops out of the center of subjective spontaneity, in Kierkegaard the ‘I’ is thrown back onto itself by the superior power of otherness.”¹⁶ With the subject cruelly forced by transcendence into a restless searching that divine alterity equally guarantees will never be consummated, Kierkegaard represents a dour irrationalism:

He prefers to let consciousness circle about in the self’s own dark labyrinth and communicating passageways, without beginning or aim, hopelessly expecting hope to flair up at the end of the most distant tunnel as the distant light of escape, rather than deluding himself with the *fata morgana* of static ontology in which the promises of an autonomous *ratio* are left unfulfilled.¹⁷

This is the version of the Kierkegaardian dialectic which this chapter will contest, one that resolves entirely in subjectivity and inwardness, in the ultimate futility of the search for meaning. It’s a reading that does not sit easily with Kierkegaard’s more explicit religious claims. But in order to prepare for those religious claims, it is important to have a little more background in Kierkegaard’s pietistic influences, beyond the simplistic assertion that his Lutheran heritage entails a wholesale rejection of reason.

Two scholars in particular have noticed that the pietistic influence on Kierkegaard’s thought locates any notion of a dialectic in something other than the merely existential search for meaning. George Pattison has situated Kierkegaard in the legacy of Schleiermacher, arguing that “the basic contours of Kierkegaard’s thinking about the relationship between God and the world and, especially, between God and human beings bear an essentially Schleiermacherian

¹⁴ Adorno, *Kierkegaard*, 27.

¹⁵ Adorno, *Kierkegaard*, 28.

¹⁶ Adorno, *Kierkegaard*, 29.

¹⁷ Adorno, *Kierkegaard*, 31-2.

shape.”¹⁸ Significantly, this “open[s] the way for the actual practices of piety . . . and ‘works of love’ to play a central role in defining the character of Christian faith.”¹⁹ Pattison identifies four features of Schleiermacher’s project which Kierkegaard’s dialectic also addresses, 1) that “the basic structure of the religious life is determined by a sense or feeling of absolute dependence on God;” 2) “that every human life has the possibility of entering into a God-relationship;” 3) “that this possibility is realized in an experienced need of God; and 4) “this need and this gift are focused on the person of the redeemer, the Christ.”²⁰ Essentially then, a Kierkegaardian dialectic borrows the shape of Schleiermacher’s thought, with the emphasis placed on the most pietistic elements of Schleiermacher’s project. The disciple is moved by the felt need for God, “the gift of the longing or love for God.”²¹ This ache for God is met not by divine self-disclosure per se, but by the call to the *imitatio Christi*, and here the influence of Lutheran pietism becomes most evident. Pattison does not fully explain how this dialectic might work in Kierkegaard’s thought, except to suggest that his “theology is not an attempt to teach his readers the truth about God” but to “call to them to get moving and to rise up and to follow where and wherever incarnate love will lead them.”²²

In order to give more definition to this pietistic influence on Kierkegaard’s work, Christopher Barnett has written a thorough account of the varieties of Protestant piety descended from Johann Arndt via Jakob Spener. While the so-called Halle pietism was the first to reach Denmark, Barnett focuses on the Moravian branch of pietism which planted deeper roots in the Danish context and had the greatest influence on Kierkegaard.²³ The net result of this analysis—with respect to the nature of the Kierkegaardian dialectic—is that pietistic thought provided a foundation for a shift in Kierkegaard’s emphasis between the first and second phases of the pseudonymical authorship. These phases are separated by the so-called *Corsair* affair, in which Kierkegaard traded intellectual blows with a Copenhagen literary magazine. While previously it may have been the case that Kierkegaard had located the essence of Christianity in “hidden inwardness,” Barnett argues that the humiliation of the *Corsair* affair combined with the influ-

¹⁸ George Pattison, *Kierkegaard and the Theology of the Nineteenth Century: The Paradox and the ‘Point of Contact’* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012), 7.

¹⁹ Pattison, *Kierkegaard and Theology*, 8.

²⁰ Pattison, *Kierkegaard and Theology*, 8.

²¹ Pattison, *Kierkegaard and Theology*, 228.

²² Pattison, *Kierkegaard and Theology*, 228.

²³ Christopher B. Barnett, *Kierkegaard, Pietism and Holiness* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 40.

ence of pietistic literature led Kierkegaard to reformulate this essence around “suffering servanthood.”²⁴ This latter emphasis placed Kierkegaard squarely in the tradition of the *imitatio Christi*, albeit without the whiff of “meritoriousness” that hovered over the monastic tradition.²⁵ Thus, the *imitatio Christi* became not a laudatory renunciation of the world, but a “willingness to let go of and, in turn, to suffer temporal power in the midst of secular society.”²⁶ This led to a renewed kind of dialectic, one in which the suffering of the “unrecognizable” deprives them of self while also making them proper imitations of Christ.²⁷

It is from within this consideration of pietism’s influence on Kierkegaard that this chapter will try to reconfigure a notion of ‘dialectic’ along the lines pointed out by Pattison and Barnett, but with a sharper and more comprehensive notion of what is called into question by the approach of the Absolute. The Kierkegaardian form of dialectical movement which emerges is not only a paradoxical imitation of Christ, but is also an affront to the philosophical attempt to locate dialectics purely in the realm of representations.

3.4 The *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*

3.4.1 Data from the primary source

In order to better understand a Kierkegaardian approach to dialectic, it’s important to understand something of the usage of dialectic which Kierkegaard has in mind. We’ll begin, then, with a passage from the 1846 *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Written under the pseudonym Johannes Climacus (though ‘published’ by S. Kierkegaard) the *Postscript* claims to be a kind of commentary on Climacus’ earlier *Philosophical Fragments*, albeit a commentary which exceeds the length of the original work. Our focus, for the present, is on a portion of the *Postscript* in which Kierkegaard engages with the “leap” necessary to cross Lessing’s “ugly, broad ditch”—an engagement which then leads into a critique of Hegel.²⁸

²⁴ Barnett, *Pietism and Holiness*, 139.

²⁵ Barnett, *Pietism and Holiness*, 168.

²⁶ Barnett, *Pietism and Holiness*, 169.

²⁷ Barnett, *Pietism and Holiness*, 169.

²⁸ *KW 12.1*, 98.

Climacus begins the section by admitting that his reflections are indebted to Lessing, “without being certain that he would acknowledge it.”²⁹ Lessing has constructed not only a question, but an approach to answering which Climacus would like to appropriate, without necessarily reaching the same conclusion as Lessing. The relevant feature of Lessing’s thinking is that he has introduced “another kind of reflection, specifically, that of inwardness, of possession, whereby it belongs to the subject and to no one else.”³⁰ Importantly, this creates a kind of division within the self, within the thinking person, a “double-reflection” in which the subject, “in thinking . . . thinks the universal, but as existing in this thinking . . . he becomes more and more subjectively isolated.”³¹

Another way to explain this internal division is by reference to human communication. In speaking a sentence, the speaker is attempting to give the listener a token—a verbal sentence, for example—representing the speaker’s thought. Ideally, the listener could attend carefully to the words, and from them deduce the speaker’s thoughts. But as soon as the speaker vocalizes a word, that word is actually something different from the thought itself, and so a divide—however small at first—begins to grow. The listener has access to the word, but not the thought itself. If the listener affirms the word and thinks thereby that she has accessed the speaker’s thoughts, she is mistaken, though unwittingly so, having “no intimation that this kind of agreement can be the greatest misunderstanding.”³²

The implication of this divide is that, if one wants to truly communicate—which is to say, if the speaker wants to truly draw the listener into an understanding of the speaker’s thought—then a different form of communication is required, an indirect form. For the speaker to simply speak his mind “is a fraud toward God . . . toward himself . . . toward another human being” because it implies an ease of access to the speaker’s thinking which is false.³³ Instead, “when someone is set on communicating this directly, he is obtuse” because being honest about the inherent obscurity of communication is actually the first step toward bringing the listener into view of the thought.³⁴

²⁹ *KW 12.1*, 72.

³⁰ *KW 12.1*, 73.

³¹ *KW 12.1*, 73.

³² *KW 12.1*, 74.

³³ *KW 12.1*, 75.

³⁴ *KW 12.1*, 79.

Significantly, for our purposes, as much as Climacus purports to be borrowing from Lessing, Climacus' ditch is quite different from what Lessing's is normally assumed to be. Lessing is associated with the insurmountability of the boundary between the "contingent truths of history" and "the necessary truths of reason."³⁵ But Climacus is not speaking about a division between historical life and divine truth, but about a division occurring within historical life, a duality inherent to being a concrete person. What Climacus' divide suggests is not that the subjective thinker cannot think truly or even communicate truly, but that the attempt to communicate directly inherently obscures the truth. If truth is to be communicated, it must occur in a different kind of medium than direct communication with verbal speech as its paradigm.

The inherent unsuitability of the normal means of communication for actually communicating creates a kind of dialectical movement across this divide internal to historical existence. "The genuine subjective existing thinker is always just as negative as he is positive."³⁶ The subject never arrives at her destination, at least not in this life, but "is continually in the process of becoming."³⁷ This 'process of becoming' is less a romantic, existential notion than a bare description of divided existence, a description of the inherent elusiveness of meaning in representation. In that way, "the process of becoming is the thinker's very existence, from which he can indeed thoughtlessly abstract and become objective."³⁸ This 'becoming objective' would be at the subject's peril—it would provide a feeling of certainty only in virtue of a deception, an abstraction which would be thoughtless precisely in ignoring the subject's own thinking.

Lessing's ditch separates, for instance, a historical critical reading of scripture from Christian faith. There is no bridge of necessity which crosses from the first to the second. This interpretation of Lessing leads down a path which Climacus wants to avoid, "to make the eternal historical as a matter of course and to assume an ability to comprehend the necessity of the historical."³⁹ What Climacus prefers to take from Lessing is the notion of "striving for truth,"⁴⁰ that in "the incommensurability between a historical truth and an eternal decision"⁴¹ we are provoked to search for truth. As Climacus acknowledges, this makes it difficult to know what

³⁵ *KW 12.1*, 97.

³⁶ *KW 12.1*, 85.

³⁷ *KW 12.1*, 86.

³⁸ *KW 12.1*, 91.

³⁹ *KW 12.1*, 98.

⁴⁰ *KW 12.1*, 108.

⁴¹ *KW 12.1*, 98.

to do with Lessing's 'leap,' insofar as it suggests not a dialectic but a once-for-all venture to unreflectively believe. The best Climacus can say is that it reminds him of something he had "read" in "*Fear and Trembling* by Johannes de Silentio."⁴² Kierkegaard thereby has one of his pseudonyms affirm the other's form of a leap in the "decision."⁴³ The decision to enter into Christian life suggests not a permanent removal from one ground to another, nor even anything as firm as a ground from which one may leap, but a venture into an engagement with subjectivity and its attendant problems. Climacus affirms this version of a 'leap' by citing an often neglected passage of Lessing's work in which Lessing chooses an "ever-striving drive for truth, even with the corollary of erring forever" over the assurance of knowledge because—as he exclaims to God—"Pure truth is indeed only for you alone!"⁴⁴ This passage of Lessing's bears more resemblance to Climacus' version of a leap. If one presumes that the divide is not between the historical and the Absolute, per se, but is internal to the existence of the historical, then this gap is uncrossable for the historical human being. It is endemic to the human's existence, and thus must be wrestled with rather than bounded over.

Climacus is aware that this dialectical solution to the problem puts us well within range of Hegel, who has made "everyone . . . now familiar with the dialectic of becoming."⁴⁵ Indeed, Hegel appears to have achieved a creative new paradigm for thought—"the importation of movement into logic."⁴⁶ But in attempting to systematize the movement of self-reflection, Hegel has violated the basic divide at the heart of existence. He has attempted to subordinate a thing which cannot be systematized—existence—under a thing which necessarily must be systematized—logic. Thus, in the Hegelian system, Climacus argues that logic's overbearing dominance has prevailed, that existence has not so much de-systematized logic as it has been unhelpfully systematized by it. Thus, the problem is not only that existence has become systematized, but that it has thereby become secondary. In place of Hegel, Climacus prefers the work of F.A. Trendelenburg, whose own approach to idealism more robustly asserts "movement as the inexplicable presupposition, as the common denominator in which being and thinking are united."⁴⁷

⁴² *KW 12.1*, 105.

⁴³ *KW 12.1*, 105.

⁴⁴ *KW 12.1*, 106.

⁴⁵ *KW 12.1*, 80.

⁴⁶ *KW 12.1*, 109.

⁴⁷ *KW 12.1*, 110.

Climacus' concern is not with the dialectical movement of Hegel's thought—not with the notion of 'becoming'—but with the idea that movement yields the construction of a logic, that it can be circumscribed within a mere conceptual paradigm. Movement cuts much deeper than Hegel appreciates, which becomes clearer when Climacus discusses “the dialectic of the beginning.”⁴⁸ “Hegelian society” asserts that “the system begins with the immediate and therefore without presuppositions and therefore absolutely.”⁴⁹ The question which Climacus wants to know, then, is whether dialectical movement can be said to begin with the immediate “immediately.”⁵⁰ In other words, is there truly a first position which is not already mediated, and if not, doesn't this mean that in fact existence ought to be privileged over logic, that the philosopher is never truly at the beginning, precisely as a living human being. Thus, Climacus confesses:

I, Johannes Climacus, am neither more nor less than a human being; and I assume that the one with whom I have the honor of conversing is also a human being. If he wants to be speculative thought, pure speculative thought, I must give up conversing with him.⁵¹

If the interlocutor is not also willing to admit the unsuitability of language to real communication, then there is little else to be gained from the conversation than further confusion. The nature of language as a web of representations means that “a logical system can be given; but a system of existence cannot be given.”⁵²

3.4.2 Observations

The starting point for a Kierkegaardian notion of dialectic must account for his appropriation of Lessing. What we have at this early stage is a notion of dialectic as internal to the historical condition of existence. In this respect, we see hints of Adorno's concern, that the dialectic is rooted in subjectivity and is initiated by the 'leap' of a free decision. But subjectivity is not a description of pure internality at this stage, but a description of the awareness of expression's alienation from thought. The searching after truth which follows is not isolated from empirical reality, and is thus not merely an existential search for meaning. It is a searching that takes into

⁴⁸ *KW 12.I*, 111.

⁴⁹ *KW 12.I*, 111.

⁵⁰ *KW 12.I*, 112.

⁵¹ *KW 12.I*, 109.

⁵² *KW 12.I*, 109.

account the truth of empirical reality standing at some remove from our attempts to represent it in speech. Absolute truth thus compels us in our search, precisely because we recognize our basic incapacity for apprehending it. In this way, we are pursuing the truth, and this pursuit happens in our real existence, in our everyday, empirical lives, so long as—through a reflective subjectivity—we become aware of this real existence as itself divided.

Put in slightly more concrete terms, what Kierkegaard argues is that the varieties of ways that we speak about or attempt to portray reality—even to ourselves, in our own minds—is always at some remove from reality itself. This inherent division is meant to be overcome, not merely accepted. But it can only be overcome by acknowledging the problem, which is that our attempts to categorize and systematize our experience of reality are mere projection, unable to account for actual reality. Any sort of Hegelian attempt to make a new system out of this uncomfortable situation is subject to the paradox of its own origin. If representations are inherently abstracting us from the truth, we will not solve the problem by assimilating the whole of reality into the process of thinking through representation. But in order to give this claim a little more substance, we will turn in the next section to a more indirect but provocative critique of a Hegelian notion of dialectic found in Kierkegaard's earlier work.

3.5 Repetition: A Venture in Experimenting Psychology

3.5.1 Data from the primary source

Repetition: A Venture in Experimenting Psychology is a relatively obscure work in Kierkegaard's corpus. Written as a philosophical novella under the pseudonym Constantin Constantius, *Repetition* is often overshadowed by its quasi-companion book, *Fear and Trembling*, published on the same day in 1843. It is constructed as a series of personal letters from an anonymous young man bracketed by a kind of reflective journal which also serves as a commentary on the letters by their recipient, the putative author, Constantius. The book opens by establishing its theme, "the question of repetition—whether or not it is possible, what importance it has, whether something gains or loses in being repeated,"⁵³ a motif which plays itself out, appropriately, at intervals across the book. The driving conceit of Constantius' portions of the book is his attempt to demonstrate the viability of repetition by retracing the steps of a previous

⁵³ KW 6, 131.

holiday in Berlin, thereby silencing those convinced of repetition's impossibility like Diogenes silencing the Eleatics by rising and pacing when they questioned the existence of motion.⁵⁴

At stake are two larger problems. The first is religious, in a sense, and is of greatest concern for the present thesis. The task of being a Christian disciple appears at least to contain within it some notion of repetition. Sacraments, prayers, acts of service, even martyrdoms occur again and again and each is assumed to be a repetition, a re-manifestation and thus a new participation in the original events of Last Supper, or Gethsemane, or Crucifixion. Whether repetition in this sense is possible is important for anyone wanting to speak of discipleship. But we will only be able to return to this question after considering the second dimension of Kierkegaard's concern over the existence of repetition.

This second dimension is philosophical. Constantius implies that the possibility of repetition is an essential ingredient to "modern philosophy," that it plays for the moderns the same function as recollection played in Greek thought.⁵⁵ Repetition is nothing more than recollection in an "opposite direction, for what is recollected has been . . . whereas genuine repetition is recollected forward."⁵⁶ By this, Constantius seems to mean that repetition and recollection are both attempts to make something manifest anew. Recollection, however, is purely mental, the mind sifting through representations previously known, though perhaps forgotten. Thus, recollection, in Constantius' reading, is the basis of "all knowing" in Greek philosophy.⁵⁷ Repetition, on the other hand, is the application of mental representations to reality. It leans into the flow of time, attempting to make a new experience out of something already experienced. This relation of recollection and repetition—in their common debt to "the concept of *kinesis*"⁵⁸—is the unacknowledged origin of Hegel's thought. "Repetition proper," Constantius claims, "is what has mistakenly been called mediation."⁵⁹

Vermittlung (mediation) and its opposite, *Unmittelbarkeit* (immediacy), deserve to be briefly unpacked in order to progress through the argument. While immediacy might appear to be

⁵⁴ KW 6, 131.

⁵⁵ KW 6, 131.

⁵⁶ KW 6, 131.

⁵⁷ KW 6, 131.

⁵⁸ KW 6, 149.

⁵⁹ KW 6, 148.

desirable—suggesting a directness and transparency of perception—the Hegelian dialectic reverses this assumption.⁶⁰ Immediacy becomes naïveté, a failure to progress, an unwillingness to work through the reflection of consciousness upon itself. Mediation, on the other hand, stands in as representative for the main engine of Hegelian dialecticism. Consciousness, in its encounter with experience, finds itself mediated by a third partner—a self-consciousness, a reflection of consciousness back on itself which thus alters what constitutes the original consciousness. This alteration to consciousness thus generates a new acknowledgment of the self in relation to the other, and thus a new experience, which prompts new self-reflection, and so on. The dialectic of consciousness in this local sense is thus also the outworking of a more cosmic dialectic, in which the particular and the universal find their own relating mediated by the individual. Here—in the unfolding of the individual’s consciousness—is the constant negotiation of an understanding of universal principles alongside and against the gritty complexity of particular experience.

In linking repetition and *Vermittlung*, Kierkegaard, via Constantius, is making a very nuanced critique of Hegel, the implications of which will only become clear later. The seeming newness of the Hegelian synthesis, the awareness gained in self-reflection, is also a folding back of insight into the awareness of the self having the experience—what is new in self-consciousness is not so far removed from the old consciousness. This is not a critique—as some offer—that the Hegelian dialectic ultimately smothers difference with more of the self. There is something rightly called new about consciousness after it undergoes mediation, but there is equally something old, and that oldness is the familial resemblance of new awareness to all the insights which preceded it. This is the “easy” dialectic of repetition, “that which is repeated has been—otherwise it could not be repeated—but the very fact that it has been makes the repetition into something new.”⁶¹ It is not something qualitatively different about insight that separates it from previous insights, it is rather the mere fact that it is not those previous insights which makes us

⁶⁰ The following sketch of Hegel’s concept of mediation principally arises from his section on “Die Subjektivität” in George Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik, Zweiter Band: Die Lehre Von Begriff*, ed. Hans-Jürgen Gawoll (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1994, originally published in 1816), 31ff. My own reading has been influenced by the interpretations of Thomas Schmidt, “Die Logik der Reflexion: Der Schein und die Wesenheiten” in *Wissenschaft der Logik*, eds. Anton Friedrich Koch and Friedrike Schick (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2002): 99-117 and the chapter entitled “Immanent and Quasi-Transcendental Thought” in Stephen Houlgate, *The Opening of Hegel’s Logic* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue UP, 2006), 103ff.

⁶¹ *KW 6*, 149.

consider it something new. Synthesis is always another in a long line of syntheses, though its happening now rather than in the past remains significant.

This critique slowly becomes clearer as *Repetition* progresses and it turns out that Constantius is utterly unsatisfied with his attempts to prove the possibility of repetition. He travels to Berlin, but finds that no matter how hard he tries, his new vacation differs from his old. He sits in a different seat on the carriage journey,⁶² he finds his previous accommodation unavailable,⁶³ he discovers that he has inadvertently arrived on a public holiday.⁶⁴ Most importantly, he spends an evening at the theatre re-watching a favorite play, only to be reminded that the first time he attended, there had been a young girl watching in a nearby box. Constantius remembers observing this young girl throughout the play even as he observed the play, watching her watching, her reactions reinforcing his own experiences of the play's narrative force.⁶⁵ On his return visit, however, she is gone. He finds his own emotions no longer moved by the drama and he leaves early.⁶⁶ Returning to his apartment, he descends into a funk, convinced that he is engaged in "a repetition of the wrong kind."⁶⁷ He continues repeating everything which he had done on his last trip, but now joylessly, the memories of previous pleasures not only mocking but actively causing the emptiness of the current experience. "My mind was sterile," he writes, "my troubled imagination constantly conjured up tantalizingly attractive recollections of how the ideas had presented themselves last time, and the tare of these recollections choked out every thought at birth."⁶⁸ The rest of the trip passes similarly, with the memory of lost pleasures detracting from the possibility of taking any new pleasure in the same activities. Each new failure to take pleasure in the trip drives home his disconsolation, and Constantius is left to conclude "that there simply is no repetition," though, ironically, he has "verified it by having it having it repeated in every possible way."⁶⁹

Constantius leaves us with that subtle provocation, that repetition both does and does not occur, that the repetition of mental states is not possible but the repetition of existential crises is. "The only repetition," Constantius writes, "was the impossibility of a repetition."⁷⁰ One senses from

⁶² KW 6, 151.

⁶³ KW 6, 152.

⁶⁴ KW 6, 153.

⁶⁵ KW 6, 166-168.

⁶⁶ KW 6, 169.

⁶⁷ KW 6, 169.

⁶⁸ KW 6, 169.

⁶⁹ KW 6, 171.

⁷⁰ KW 6, 170.

his litany of complaints that what prevents Constantius from proving the possibility of repetition is his own fussy self-absorption about his experience of repetition, that he may in fact have been more successful at repeating his previous trip if he had been less mindful of it as an act of repetition. Repetition, it turns out, may be possible, but not if the locus of repetition is the consciousness.

And with that, we can finally turn back to the religious concern of *Repetition*. As is often the case in Kierkegaard's work, there are multiple arguments interwoven within a book that itself is only one element of larger arguments unfolding. Interspersed with Constantius' account of his Berlin trip is a series of letters being sent to Constantius by an unnamed 'young man' of his acquaintance. The young correspondent has also taken up the question of the possibility of repetition, now from within his own experience of deciding whether or not to marry a young woman. Constantius later comments that the young man "is suffering from a misplaced melancholy high-mindedness,"⁷¹ and there is a flare for the histrionic in the letters. The young man's fevered anxiety about the right course of action is mixed with his reflections on the biblical figure Job, "so human in every way."⁷² Job's life carries the weight of "the idea,"⁷³ it is the purity of his innocence which is his "vital force."⁷⁴ It is this purity which turns him into a kind of "exception to all human observations."⁷⁵ In his experience of forsakenness, as the young man understands it, Job undergoes "an ordeal,"⁷⁶ a divine "thunderstorm."⁷⁷ The net result of this ordeal is that, in the end, Job "has received everything *double*."⁷⁸ Is not this then a repetition, the young man asks, that Job should receive back precisely what he lost and even more?⁷⁹ "So there is repetition, after all," the young man concludes, "When does it occur? Well, that is hard to say in any human language. . . . When every *thinkable* human certainty and probability were impossible."⁸⁰

⁷¹ KW 6, 216.

⁷² KW 6, 204.

⁷³ KW 6, 207.

⁷⁴ KW 6, 207.

⁷⁵ KW 6, 207.

⁷⁶ KW 6, 209.

⁷⁷ KW 6, 212.

⁷⁸ KW 6, 212, emphasis in original.

⁷⁹ KW 6, 212.

⁸⁰ KW 6, 212.

Here, the young man appears to have stumbled across a definition of repetition quite similar to Constantius'. But the young man's understanding of this repetition becomes for him a new ideality, a justification for choosing his own romantic ordeal in the hopes that "now Governance can all the more easily help me."⁸¹ For this he receives the strongest criticism from Constantius, who writes in his closing remarks on the whole affair that the young man "explains the universal as repetition, and yet he himself understands repetition in another way, for although actuality becomes the repetition, for him the repetition is the raising of his consciousness to the second power."⁸² The true repetition which could properly function dialectically is not an advance from consciousness to higher consciousness, but a subversion of consciousness by particularity.

Constantius' final meditation on 'the exception' in *Repetition* serves as an oblique reference to this dialectic. Christ as the universal is a 'rule' in terms of depicting true humanity. The perfect exception to that rule is both the chief of sinners and the most remarkable of saints. The exception is sinner as standing apart from Christ, from true humanity, as not conforming to the rule. And yet the exception, in an indirect manner, also belongs to the rule, is defined by it, could not exist without it, and thus "arises in the midst of the universal."⁸³ The disciple, as exception to the life of Christ, neither belongs to the universal, nor belongs to what is utterly excluded from the universal—is not yet perfectly conformed to Christ, and yet stands outside of pure sinfulness. The disciple stands outside of pure sinfulness not in virtue of some merit, but in virtue of her striving with the universal. Constantius calls up an image resonant of Jacob at the Jabbok, in which "the universal breaks with the exception, wrestles with him in conflict, and strengthens him through this wrestling."⁸⁴ Thus, the knowledge that the exception possesses of the universal is also a kind of self-knowledge, an awareness of herself as sinner, a knowing of Christ precisely by seeing him *unreflected* in her own understanding.

3.5.2 Observations

Drawing together the various threads from this excursion into repetition, we find that any Kierkegaardian dialectic must be of a peculiar sort, one that navigates between Hegel and Fichte.

⁸¹ KW 6, 213.

⁸² KW 6, 229.

⁸³ KW 6, 226.

⁸⁴ KW 6, 227.

The story of Constantius serves as a response to Hegel. Constantius' ideality (his eager expectations to enjoy Berlin again) collides with particularity (the slight but significant differences in the second trip) and proves the impossibility of repetition, at least as the cornerstone for a logic. There is no way to systematize the intellectual act of repetition when it is constantly subverted by reality. At the same time, this constant subversion by reality creates its own kind of quasi-Hegelian movement. It is, indeed, a kind of driving repetition, not by permitting the advance to a higher state of understanding, but by provoking the descent into particularity.

Similarly, the character of the young man in *Repetition* serves as a response to Fichte. His desire is to turn repetition into a self-actualizing principle—making decisions which subvert one's own desires as a method for achieving one's final goals. Constantius' criticism of the young man, that he is merely 'raising consciousness to the second power,' echoes Kierkegaard's critique in his dissertation of a "development in modern philosophy attained in Kant and . . . completed in Fichte, and more specifically again to the positions that after Fichte sought to affirm subjectivity in its second potency."⁸⁵ This development represents a kind of doubling down on subjectivity, "an intensified subjective consciousness"⁸⁶ associated with a kind of irony which differs from the Socratic irony Kierkegaard advocates. We will return to this thought in the next section. Suffice to say, for the moment, that the young man of *Repetition* appears to represent exactly the caricature of Kierkegaard which Adorno portrays, a notion of reality dependent on an intensely inward self-actualization. The critique of the young man should suggest, then, that something more is going on Kierkegaard's thought than what we would normally assume by his focus on subjectivity.

The language of dialectic after Hegel imagines the universal and the particular as opposing terms, mediated in conceptual experience. For Kierkegaard, in contrast, the basic paradox is that, christologically, the universal and the particular find themselves not at odds, but unified. Together, on the same end of the spectrum, they are opposed precisely by Hegel's mediating term, consciousness. The universal and the particular stand shoulder to shoulder, staring down the jumble of illusions, fantasies, passions, and ideologies that pass for the human experience. The indebtedness of *Vermittlung* to repetition, and of repetition to recollection, is thus revealed

⁸⁵ KW 2, 242.

⁸⁶ KW 2, 242.

in the inability of the Hegelian dialectic to conceive of experience outside of mental representations, and thus its inability to permit consciousness to be properly transcended by the concreteness of living. To the extent that something akin to a dialectic exists in Kierkegaard's opposing terms, it creates, from the vantage of human experience, an impossibility. The movement of the universal-particular into human experience can be received as nothing more than an absurdity, as Kierkegaard puts it in the *Philosophical Fragments*, "the ultimate paradox of thought: to want to discover something that thought itself cannot think."⁸⁷ And the movement of human experience towards the universal-particular can only be understood, from the human perspective, as a kind of undoing, as a stripping away of the supposed pre-conditions of thought, as a total self-surrender.

What do we take away from this elliptical movement that can help develop an account of discipleship's epistemic implications? There are two conclusions we can draw. First, discipleship locates us in a particular relation to both God and reality. Our own being and understanding is transcended by the divine presence—this seems fairly intuitive to a traditional way of speaking about God. Moreover, secondly, our own being and understanding is equally transcended by the particularity of reality. Consciousness takes its own experience, if nothing else, to be the concrete starting point of thought. But experience is a clumsy grasping at the granularity of reality, it is the perpetual glossing over of what is actual in favor of what is relevant to the conscious mind. We should not be surprised to find God on the side of reality, hand-in-hand, opposing our illusions. Thus, even the disciple should not be surprised to find herself—to recall a phrase from Pascal—surpassed by a 'double infinity.' The call of God introduces us to a divinity surpassing understanding, and at the same time calls us into the specificity of a way of life in relation to this God—a path of obedience—to which we fail to attain persistently and comprehensively.

The second conclusion which follows on from this reflection on *Repetition* is that religious language which prioritises obedience (as this thesis might appear to do) should be cautious. Religious language—even language about obedience—also belongs to consciousness, while actual obedience represents a conformity to God which may entail the loss not only of a religious vocabulary, but the loss of our expectation that language is a fruitful entry into reality, either positively or negatively. This includes even the language of discipleship as an 'imitation'

⁸⁷ KW 7, 37.

of Christ, an idea which is both true and—like all ideas—replete with the possibilities of falseness. The imitation of Christ is a repetition, but not in the simplistic sense of *Repetition*'s young man. Imitation is not positively available as an ethic, a set of principles, or an abstract notion of fidelity to tradition or a sense of Scripture. It will not provide a set of parameters within which 'governance can all the more easily help.' Discipleship is an imitation (and thus a repetition) more complexly. Many are prepared to proclaim the call to obedience, few are prepared to obey, because to do so is to enter into an impossibility. This impossibility is the essence of discipleship. It is the movement of God towards the disciple and the movement of the disciple towards God, the stripping away of the idolatries which hinder obedience. And it is this impossibility which generates a movement, a participation again and again in death and resurrection, which is itself the proper imitation of Christ. The particularity of real obedience, a real life in relation to God, subverts ideology again and again, even the ideologies of righteousness, and it is this subversion which makes a genuine participation in Christ possible.

It is in this respect that *Repetition* fits together as a "secret either/or"⁸⁸ with its sister book, *Fear and Trembling*. The righteous ideal subverted in *Repetition* is the aesthetizing impulse of the young man, who attempts to make Job's noble suffering into a universal concept. The righteous ideal in *Fear and Trembling* is more straightforwardly a commonsense notion of the ethical. Abraham, as the exception in this case, in attempting to sacrifice Isaac, "transgressed the ethical altogether and had a higher *telos* outside it, in relation to which he suspended it."⁸⁹ Both notions of rapturous emotional perfection and rigorous ethical perfection are subverted, not in favor of a generalized relativism, but precisely by the opposition of the universal and the particular to these self-serving representations.

In the background of our reflection so far has been the question of Kierkegaard's understanding of irony. If this Kierkegaardian dialectic is advanced by the use of indirect communication, then it would be useful to understand more of what Kierkegaard means by this term. The next section will take up the origin of the term in Kierkegaard's dissertation.

⁸⁸ Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, "Historical Introduction," *KW* 6, xix.

⁸⁹ *KW* 6, 59.

3.6 *The Concept of Irony*

3.6.1 *Data from the primary source*

Kierkegaard's dissertation at the University of Copenhagen, published in 1841 as *The Concept of Irony, With Continual Reference to Socrates*, was an unusual piece of academic work. Divided into two parts, the first part makes an extensive examination of Socrates' portrayal in Plato's dialogues, but through the lens of Kierkegaard's notion of irony. It is only in the second part where the results of this examination are drawn together into a more robust account of irony and its philosophical implications. It is to this second part that we will turn now.

Kierkegaard would later write about Socrates as the “midwife”⁹⁰ of knowledge, bringing the possibility of true existence into being through his use of irony. It is important then, to begin with distinguishing between Kierkegaard's understanding of two different definitions of irony, one he associates with the post-Hegelian idealists, the other he associates with Socrates. The Socratic form of irony Kierkegaard refers to as “contemplative irony”⁹¹ or “the first form of irony.”⁹² The idealist form of irony Kierkegaard refers to as “executive irony”⁹³ or—as we have already noted—irony “raised to the second power” as “the assertion of subjectivity in a still higher form.”⁹⁴

What the two forms of irony share is a “salient feature . . . the subjective freedom that at all times has in its power the possibility of a beginning and is not handicapped by earlier situations.”⁹⁵ Speaker and listener enter into conversation with a received set of representations. There are words which each are accustomed to hearing, forms of expression which are considered acceptable, patterns of thought which are understood as self-evident. But consider “the ironic figure of speech . . . that characterizes all irony.”⁹⁶ To speak ironically is to attempt to communicate something by saying the opposite, i.e. by not communicating directly. “Already here we have a quality that permeates all irony—namely, that the phenomenon is not the essence but the opposite of the essence.”⁹⁷ Irony possesses “a certain superiority deriving from

⁹⁰ KW 7, 10.

⁹¹ KW 2, 254.

⁹² KW 2, 242.

⁹³ KW 2, 254.

⁹⁴ KW 2, 242.

⁹⁵ KW 2, 253.

⁹⁶ KW 2, 248.

⁹⁷ KW 2, 247.

its not wanting to be understood immediately, even though it wants to be understood.”⁹⁸ The ironic expression is thus an act of freedom in virtue of being unconstrained by the received set of definitions and expectations. Indeed, it points out that the truth lies somewhere beneath or behind these representations by attempting to communicate this truth while also refusing to abide by the mores of “plain and simple talk that everyone can promptly understand.”⁹⁹ All irony begins by pointing out this deficiency, that even ‘plain and simple’ talk can obfuscate reality, that our representations exist at some remove from reality. The ironist might then appear, at first glance, as a jester, a kind of mocking nihilist, one who refuses to admit any meaning to the speech society considers meaningful—“For irony, everything becomes nothing.”¹⁰⁰

Nihilism is not the end of the story, however, because Kierkegaard hastens to add that “nothing can be taken in several ways.”¹⁰¹ In the idealist, ‘executive,’ sense, it is true that irony comes to mean “dissimulation . . . mockery, satire, persiflage, etc.”¹⁰² In this mode, “irony . . . has no purpose; its purpose is immanent in itself.”¹⁰³ It makes no effort to accomplish some other end; it only exists for the sake of its own self-expression. In this manner, it seeks to undermine all knowledge which does not begin with itself. Nothing, for the idealist form of irony, “is the vanishing at every moment with regard to the concretion, since it is itself the craving of the concrete.”¹⁰⁴ The idealist uses irony because she demands some kind of starting point for thought. Unable to see any in the world of representations, she takes her own capacity for generating meaning to be the bedrock of knowledge, and mockingly dismisses all other attempts.

The Socratic thinker, however, uses irony very differently, with a different beginning and a different goal. This “contemplative side”¹⁰⁵ of irony is “essentially practical,”¹⁰⁶ it has something beyond its own self-expression in mind. Socratic irony intends to alter the hearer’s lived existence, and thus induct them into the truth rather than merely giving them an apprehension of truth. It provides “not a conclusion, not a point of departure for a more profound speculation,

⁹⁸ *KW 2*, 248.

⁹⁹ *KW 2*, 248.

¹⁰⁰ *KW 2*, 258.

¹⁰¹ *KW 2*, 258.

¹⁰² *KW 2*, 256.

¹⁰³ *KW 2*, 256.

¹⁰⁴ *KW 2*, 258.

¹⁰⁵ *KW 2*, 256.

¹⁰⁶ *KW 2*, 257.

but the speculative element in the idea,” and thereby lends Socrates a kind of “divine authority” by locating his work “in the realm of the particular.”¹⁰⁷ The apparent negativity of the Socratic ironist is merely “the unerring eye for what is crooked, wrong, and vain in existence.”¹⁰⁸ Socrates represents the ideal ‘midwife’ not because he either clarifies or complicates the rhetorical gymnastics of the sophists, but because his mode of speaking intends to place trueness on a plane that the sophists cannot touch. By “cutting off the besieged through his questions, which starved the garrison out of opinions, conceptions, time-honored traditions,”¹⁰⁹ Socrates “triumphed over the phenomenon at every moment.”¹¹⁰ Socratic irony thus intends to oppose the entire realm of self-serving speech for the sake of more accurately manifesting the truth. “Irony *sensu eminentiori* [in the eminent sense] is directed not against this or that particular existing entity but against the entire given actuality at a certain time and under certain conditions.”¹¹¹

The Socratic ironist is not attempting to score points within the dialogical game of contemporary debate, the ironist is attempting to bring truth into being via the overthrow of the entire apparatus on which the debate depends. While it may appear to coincide, at times, with a kind of petulant, even snobbish dismissal of acceptable norms, its intent is not nihilism for the sake of asserting the ironist’s superiority. The ‘nothing’ which the Socratic ironist advances is not the abolition of truth, but a “mystic nothing” which is only “a nothing with regard to the representation, a nothing that nevertheless is just as full of content as the silence of the night is full of sounds for someone who has ears to hear.”¹¹² The subversiveness of the Socratic ironist is not cynical mocking. It is an attempt to free its hearers from the shackles of received expectations, and thus bring them closer into the reality of quietly-abiding, divine mystery, transcendent of all representation.

3.6.2 Observations

In the notion of irony which he attributes to Socrates, we begin to see the depth of Kierkegaard’s critique not only of the philosophy of his day, but of the nature of its philosophising. Irony serves the purpose of the universal-particular by fundamentally opposing representation, by operating in a venue apart from the cognitive or linguistic. Irony thus serves as the attempt

¹⁰⁷ *KW 2*, 175.

¹⁰⁸ *KW 2*, 256.

¹⁰⁹ *KW 2*, 175.

¹¹⁰ *KW 2*, 176.

¹¹¹ *KW 2*, 254.

¹¹² *KW 2*, 258.

to give life to the essence which stands apart from the phenomenon, to bring the Absolute into being, or, more accurately, to participate in the being of the Absolute. Kierkegaard's aim is not to get to the logical centre of systemic thought, 'the idea,' but to the real 'speculative element' itself, to the very manifestation of what engenders the idea in the first place, an element which must operate in particularity. By being on the side of the particular it is, equally, on the side of the divine mystery.

This serves as a caution to any portrayal of Kierkegaard as a radically inward existentialist. Subjectivity here should be understood less as a speculative entry point into truth than the result of being caught up into the movement of truth. Socratic irony does, in a sense, bring the individual to subjectivity, to a self-awareness. But the underlying thrust of Kierkegaard's assumption is that this awareness would be less triumphant self-assertion than a dawning despair. It is the "upbuilding thought that in relation to God we are always in the wrong"¹¹³ and then an "anxiety about the blasphemy in the thought of wanting to be in the right in relation to God."¹¹⁴ To become truly subjective is, as with Pascal, to find oneself along the *via negativa* of the exception's isolation. It is to find something true in inwardness, but only insofar as particularity leads us there, only because "if one really wants to study the universal, one only needs to look around for a legitimate exception."¹¹⁵

The language of the 'exception' arises from the convergence of Kierkegaard's philosophical concerns with particular divine mystery that is the person of Christ. With this thesis' aim to develop the implications of a theology which follows after discipleship in mind, we will turn now to considering the particulars of Kierkegaard's language of discipleship. The intellectual agenda described so far sets out a conundrum—that philosophising must be subverted at its very core in order to become anything that could be described as a true philosophy. The resolution to this conundrum is a mode of philosophising which bears a strong resemblance to a Christian notion of discipleship.

¹¹³ *KW* 4, 350.

¹¹⁴ *KW* 4, 354.

¹¹⁵ *KW* 6, 227.

3.7 The *Philosophical Fragments*

3.7.1 *Data from the primary source*

Kierkegaard's *Philosophical Fragments* (1844) is a work too easily passed over in favor of the more rigorous and explicit philosophical engagements of its own postscript. Written under the pseudonym Johannes Climacus, the *Philosophical Fragments* are certainly fragmentary and are, in a general sense, philosophical, though they take up a very different language than most philosophers would use. Climacus describes portions of the work as a “thought-project,”¹¹⁶ “an acoustical illusion,”¹¹⁷ and “a metaphysical caprice,”¹¹⁸ all with the effect of conveying that this piece of work will be—even at the level of genre—a kind of indirect communication, a philosophy without any of the markers of philosophical discussion. Nowhere is this more evident than in Climacus’ attempt at a “poetical venture”¹¹⁹ to describe the philosophical implications of the fact that “the god has made his appearance as a teacher.”¹²⁰

If absolute truth has been made available to humanity, then it determines not only its own content, but its form:

The god’s presence is not incidental to his teaching but is essential. The presence of the god in human form—indeed, in the lowly form of a servant—is precisely the teaching, and the god himself must provide the condition; otherwise the learner is unable to understand anything.¹²¹

What does Climacus mean by ‘the condition’ in which learning is possible? At times, it sounds like an illuminated state, a repair of an intellectual apparatus permitting true sight:

Now, if the learner is to obtain the truth, the teacher must bring it to him, but not only that. Along with it, he must provide him with the condition for understanding it . . . the condition for understanding the truth is like being able to ask about it—the condition and the question contain the conditioned and the answer.¹²²

¹¹⁶ *KW* 7, 9.

¹¹⁷ *KW* 7, 49.

¹¹⁸ *KW* 7, 37.

¹¹⁹ *KW* 7, 23.

¹²⁰ *KW* 7, 55.

¹²¹ *KW* 7, 55-6.

¹²² *KW* 7, 14.

In the context of the Kierkegaardian dialectic, however, the condition should suggest not a full intellectual appropriation of the truth, but an awareness of distance from the truth. In this respect it more resembles a Lutheran *simul iustus et peccator*, the sinner being illuminated in understanding her unlikeness to God. “The paradoxical passion of the understanding”¹²³ never quite ceases. The understanding is “continually colliding with this unknown” and “never goes beyond this” collision, but nonetheless “cannot stop reaching it and being engaged with it.”¹²⁴

The fact of the god’s appearing in history is that which necessitates the divide within history, the divide which the Kierkegaardian dialectic is navigating. The “servant form” of the god “is not something put on but is actual.”¹²⁵ This actual form is more actual than anything humanity has known before; in it “the god . . . has realized the essentially human.”¹²⁶ But this servant is unique, utterly transfixed by a mission, “so absorbed in the service of the spirit that it never occurs to him to provide for food and drink.”¹²⁷ The servant thus reveals at the essence of actuality a form which disorients our experience of actuality.

The divide created by this appearing of the god is created within our “historical point of departure.”¹²⁸ From within history—which is also to say from when our memory, expectation, and current observation—the reality of the servant is inaccessible, for even a firsthand knowledge of the servant is not the same as possessing the condition.

It is easy for the contemporary learner to become a historical eyewitness, but the trouble is that knowing a historical fact—indeed, knowing all the historical facts with the trustworthiness of an eyewitness—by no means makes the eyewitness a follower, which is understandable, because such knowledge means nothing more to him than the historical.¹²⁹

¹²³ KW 7, 44.

¹²⁴ KW 7, 44.

¹²⁵ KW 7, 55.

¹²⁶ KW 7, 57.

¹²⁷ KW 7, 57.

¹²⁸ KW 7, 58.

¹²⁹ KW 7, 59.

This, then, introduces the key term for humanity's understanding of the divine—'the follower'. The follower is the one properly situated with respect to the servant. The follower has gained insight, in virtue of her "understanding" and "the paradox" (which is the servant) "happily encounter[ing] each other in the moment."¹³⁰ The moment should thus be understood as time unstuck from history or, more precisely, the assumption of the follower up into the history of the divine.

How, then, does the learner become a believer or a follower? When the understanding is discharged and he receives the condition. When does he receive this? In the moment. This condition, what does it condition? His understanding of the eternal. But a condition such as this surely must be an eternal condition. —In the moment, therefore, he receives the eternal condition, and he knows this from his having received it in the moment, for otherwise he merely calls to mind that he had it from eternity.¹³¹

This transition from learner at the feet of the teacher to follower of the servant is essential. It represents acknowledging the divide in which history is now placed. The learner is beholden to "accidental and historical knowledge."¹³² Even if the learner "cherished every instructive word which came from his mouth" and "painstakingly conferred with [others] in order to obtain the most reliable version of what the teacher taught,"¹³³ the learner would still not be a follower. The follower does not possess a historical knowledge akin to "a matter of memory."¹³⁴ The follower has been encountered by God. For the follower, it is no longer the case that "the eternal and the historical remain apart from each other."¹³⁵ The purely historical thus cannot be interrogated as a means to the eternal. The servant has surmounted the division between eternity and history only to introduce a new division within history, between the eternal-historical moment and historical experience as we understand and exert mastery over it.

¹³⁰ *KW* 7, 59.

¹³¹ *KW* 7, 64.

¹³² *KW* 7, 60.

¹³³ *KW* 7, 60.

¹³⁴ *KW* 7, 60.

¹³⁵ *KW* 7, 60.

3.7.2 Observations

This brief excursion into the *Philosophical Fragments* merely serves a kind of transition by making a relatively simple point. The point is that Kierkegaard's philosophical commitments are deeply christocentric at their core. It is Christ who manifests the paradox of the union of universal and particular, eternal and historical. Christ is thus the paradox which approaches humanity—one term of the dialectic by which our self-understanding (the other term of the dialectic) is progressively undone. The only way of appropriating this dialectic is to speak in the terminology of following. In place of the purely cognitive, historical understanding of the learner, the follower is engaged by the paradox, and thus incorporated into the movement of the paradox, the loss of self which is the growth into one's full personhood. In order to understand in what sense Christ himself is 'paradox,' and in what sense this paradox can only be participated in by discipleship, it will be necessary in the next section to take up a more explicit example of Kierkegaard's religious writings. The more explicit descriptions of Christ which we find there serve to finally draw together the philosophical implications of beginning thought with Christian discipleship.

3.8 The Writings on Self-Examination

3.8.1 Data from the primary sources

This section will examine two related pieces in Kierkegaard's body of work, *For Self-Examination* and *Judge for Yourself!*, the second piece establishing its continuity with the first by adding the subtitle, *For-Self Examination Recommended to the Present Age, Second Series*. Both were written around early 1851, although *For Self-Examination* was published later that year, while *Judge for Yourself!* was not published until after Kierkegaard's death. Together, they represent an important transitional moment in Kierkegaard's career. One can see in both pieces an intellectual continuity with the concerns of the preceding years, while also the first hints of the attack on Christendom which would characterize his remaining work.

Interpreters of Kierkegaard wrestle with what appears to be “a rather black-and-white confrontation” between “the upbuilding discourses’ simple, direct communication of religious truth and the pseudonyms’ self-indulgent errancy in the endless hide-and-seek of looking for a

truth.”¹³⁶ But in the *Self-Examination* series, one sees the merging of these two concerns. Elusive philosophy and direct attestation of Christ serve the same purpose. Both are attempts to point to a realm of concrete truth beyond what can be captured in representation.

Thus, it is important to understand the influence flowing in both directions, from religious language to philosophical and vice versa. The primacy of discipleship disrupts the normal flow of thought, an epistemological claim which creates the need for a Kierkegaardian kind of dialectic. But the disruption of thought also flows back into theological language, complicating the sort of Cartesian or even neo-Kantian foundations which ground much magisterial theology.

Kierkegaard had become increasingly explicit about this task over the preceding years. In the *Upbuilding Discourses* (1847), he describes the task of his own writing not so much in terms of changing minds with new ideas as in reorienting his listeners away from mere conceptuality and towards the actual conditions of their existence—he will have succeeded, provided that he “actually has *halted* you.”¹³⁷ There is preface in that language for what we find in *Self-Examination*, a parallel with the claim that, “from a Christian point of view” one says of the world that “it is a disease.”¹³⁸ Grim as this may sound, it is the recognition which provokes something hopeful, but only by first establishing “the unconditional condition for anything to be done,” namely, that “the very first thing that must be done is: create silence, bring about silence.”¹³⁹ The endless patter of reason is itself that which must be undone, and so that which can bring about the undoing must be a new form of knowledge entirely. It is in this sense that Kierkegaard takes himself to be “making it difficult to become a Christian.”¹⁴⁰ If Christianity is understood only “as a doctrine,” then it finds itself swept up into the stream of chatter; if Christianity is something else, however, if following after Christ serves as both “an existence-contradiction and existence-communication,” then a new kind of reason is possible.¹⁴¹

In *For Self-Examination*, Kierkegaard points out the way this reasoning begins with attentiveness to the historical Christ. “There is really only one true way to be a Christian—to be a

¹³⁶ Pattison, *Kierkegaard and Theology*, 221.

¹³⁷ *KW 15*, 153.

¹³⁸ *KW 21*, 47.

¹³⁹ *KW 21*, 47.

¹⁴⁰ *KW 12.1*, 383.

¹⁴¹ *KW 12.1*, 383.

disciple.”¹⁴² “Christ is the way,” and as such, we should not be surprised to find that “this way is narrow.”¹⁴³ This narrowness is not only expressed in Christ’s words, but in his life, and more effectively in the latter—it “is indeed a totally different continual and penetrating proclamation that the way is narrow than if his life had not expressed it and he had proclaimed a few times.”¹⁴⁴ This is not merely an ethical claim, it is not a claim that right reasoning begins with living like Christ, nor is it a claim about suffering or exclusion as a phenomenological starting point for reasoning—“It is not true of every narrow way that Christ is that way or that it leads to heaven.”¹⁴⁵ The focus must remain resolutely on the specificity of Christ, who nonetheless reveals that the way is narrow precisely because the pull between universal-particular and exception is so taut. Christ is the paradox of being “like a straight line that touches the circle at only one point, so was he in the world and yet outside the world.”¹⁴⁶

We know this tension is fundamental to Christ’s being, as his “life from the very beginning is a story of temptation.”¹⁴⁷ Kierkegaard reads this temptation largely through the messianic secret of the synoptics. In this respect, it is less about the temptation to impurity, per se, than the awareness that “he knows from the very beginning that his work is to work against himself.”¹⁴⁸ In the words of Simon Podmore, the notion here of “spiritual trial is also employed to denote an existential struggle which besets any endeavor to live out an ideal in actuality.”¹⁴⁹ Christ’s life reveals “the highest,” which is to be “unconditionally heterogenous with the world by serving God alone,” which necessarily means that “persecution is unavoidable.”¹⁵⁰ Christ works against himself in revealing this tension, that the only way to carry out his task as messiah is to evade identification as the messiah. As the good itself, there is no conclusion that can await Christ but death at the hands of an evil world, but the more manifestly he is the good, the faster this death approaches.

¹⁴² *KW 21*, 207.

¹⁴³ *KW 21*, 57, emphasis in original.

¹⁴⁴ *KW 21*, 57.

¹⁴⁵ *KW 21*, 66.

¹⁴⁶ *KW 21*, 167.

¹⁴⁷ *KW 21*, 58.

¹⁴⁸ *KW 21*, 61.

¹⁴⁹ Simon D. Podmore, *Struggling with God: Kierkegaard and the Temptation of Spiritual Trial* (Cambridge: James Clark, 2013), 157.

¹⁵⁰ *KW 21*, 169.

If he works for it with all his might, then he is working himself toward certain downfall. On the other hand, if he introduces the whole truth too quickly, his downfall will come too soon. Consequently, working against himself, he must for a time seem to enter into illusions in order to ensure the downfall all the more thoroughly.¹⁵¹

This tension at the heart of the messianic calling is a foretaste of the impossibility of discipleship, a foretaste accompanied by the experience of “a certain secret horror” when “giving thought to . . . the imitation of Christ.”¹⁵² Imitation, as has already been noted, contains the potential to be turned into mere principle. But it “must be affirmed” precisely because it is the first step towards a holy failure, it “press[es] toward humility.”¹⁵³ No one will come remotely close to imitating Christ. But that is the point. Imitation is ultimately fulfilled not by the disciple’s own righteousness, but by allowing the impossibility to carry one into “suffer[ing] for the doctrine.”¹⁵⁴ Here the disciple also reveals herself to be imitating Christ insofar as she “find[s] the confidence and boldness to want to strive to follow.”¹⁵⁵ The tension of the messianic calling thus finds its parallel in the tension of the disciple’s calling, “to become nothing before God, *and nevertheless infinitely, unconditionally engaged.*”¹⁵⁶

Incidentally, for the sake of locating a logical internal consistency to Kierkegaard’s corpus, this reading of discipleship very much presages the attack on the Danish church which marked the final years of his life. His fear is that “the situation” of Christendom means that “to suffer for the doctrine—this is abolished.”¹⁵⁷ For the argument of this thesis, it’s noteworthy that Kierkegaard believes Christendom has come about “through conceiving of Christianity as doctrine” which has created “utter confusion” about what Christianity really entails.¹⁵⁸ The alternative to basing Christianity on mere conceptuality is to base conceptuality on the task of following Christ.

¹⁵¹ *KW 21*, 61.

¹⁵² *KW 21*, 187.

¹⁵³ *KW 21*, 198.

¹⁵⁴ *KW 21*, 207.

¹⁵⁵ *KW 21*, 147.

¹⁵⁶ *KW 21*, 106, emphasis in original.

¹⁵⁷ *KW 21*, 208.

¹⁵⁸ *KW 21*, 209.

Kierkegaard thereby makes the turn back to reason, but now after Christ. He addresses this in a particular section of *Judge for Yourself!* concerned with the ‘rationality’ of the doctrine of the Ascension. “People have doubted the Ascension,” he admits, but “have any of those doubted whose lives bore the marks of *imitation* [*Efterfølgelse*]? I wonder,” he continues, “have any of those doubted who had forsaken all to follow [*følge efter*] Christ?”¹⁵⁹ Follow Christ, because “the demonstration of Christianity really lies in *imitation*.”¹⁶⁰ Reasons are not given for the Ascension according to the old standards of rationality. The sense “that there are reasons,” that the Ascension is subject to such evaluation, is “already a kind of doubt.”¹⁶¹ But what emerges from imitation is the conviction that God is God. The path of discovering this truth perhaps leads to “certitude about the Ascension,” or perhaps leads at least to certitude that one’s own position is not sufficient for questioning, that “I at least will not be a naughty child who on top of that doubts the Ascension.”¹⁶²

3.8.2 Observations

In the larger question of how we should understand a Kierkegaardian dialectic, the *Self-Examination* manuscripts assist us by pointing to a sense in which the life of Christ defines its own kind of movement through contradiction. The glory of Jesus as the Son of God is set in contrast at every point to the Jesus who wanders with no place to lay his head. The humility of Christ is not an obfuscation of his glory, but is the manifestation of faithfulness to the messianic call, and thus also a true revelation of glory. The life of Christ as himself a follower of the Father is a movement towards his glorified self which is simultaneously a movement towards his crucified self. If anything here resembles a dialectic, it is merely that the divide within history makes it difficult for us to see the crucifixion and the exaltation of Christ as one *telos* rather than two. More than creating a proper dialectic, the life of Christ shares with a Hegelian conception the notion of truth on the move, advancing towards a *telos*. But the engine of this movement is not contradiction, nor any necessary quality of logic or consciousness. The engine of this movement is the life of Christ, the mere fact that truth has become a quality of Christ’s entire person, and Christ is revealed only as one on a messianic mission. Whatever contradictions are internal to the life of Christ are more appearance than essence. Christ appears other than what he is

¹⁵⁹ *KW 21*, 67, emphasis in original.

¹⁶⁰ *KW 21*, 68, emphasis in original.

¹⁶¹ *KW 21*, 68.

¹⁶² *KW 21*, 70.

precisely because he must in order to be faithful to his calling. Therefore, the various appearances of contradiction find their underlying unity in the intention of God.

Importantly, Kierkegaard takes it to be not only possible but necessary for the Christian to also participate in this intention. Rather than suggesting, however, that participation in Christ's life implies a moral perfectionism, the Christian participates in Christ by participating in the mystery of Christ's pseudo-dialectic. The Christian also appears as divided, and is at times the sinner and at times the saint. But both aspects find their unity in God's intention—the Christian is becoming more like Christ by having her sinfulness exposed, by losing a portion of herself, while also at times becoming more like Christ by actually sharing in the work of Christ. The broader movement of the work of God sweeps up both of the apparent contradictions in the Christian's life.

More than accomplishing some kind of soteriological aim, this participation becomes the conditions for a real rationality. If knowledge of the truth is also knowledge of God, then there is no way to enter into this knowledge except by discovering where one presently stands in relation to God's intention. There is no way to speak about the reasonableness of the doctrine of the Ascension, for instance, except to understand the moment of one's speaking in its own relation to the work of God. This holds true even for the theologian, who is not faithful by merely repeating the doctrine without any correlation of this repetition to the activity of God, which may also entail understanding one's inability to articulate the doctrine as a step along the way of faithfulness.

3.9 Discussion

Knowledge, Kierkegaard writes in the *Philosophical Fragments*, begins with the “absurdity that the eternal is the historical.”¹⁶³ Thus knowledge begins to converge with faith, and the only way to make sense of either is to find oneself “related to that teacher in such a way that he is eternally occupied with his historical existence.”¹⁶⁴ To be occupied with the one whose life manifests the Absolute entails two claims. First, that even “though errors are numerous, truth

¹⁶³ KW 7, 62.

¹⁶⁴ KW 7, 62.

is still only one, and there is only one who is ‘the Way and the Life.’”¹⁶⁵ The Absolute has taken shape as person. Second, the founding claim of Christianity is that this truth is Christ, and thus “the Christian’s way has been found by him who is the Way.”¹⁶⁶ The personhood of the Absolute leads to a way of life, and life along this way—and thus the entry into knowledge—resembles discipleship.

It may be accurate to refer to Kierkegaard’s thought as dialectical, but only to the extent that, not unlike Hegel, the notion of knowledge with which he operates is more dynamic than static. The state of ‘knowing’ something is not the passive observation which characterized the subject-object relationship. ‘Knowing’ is also a verb, an activity done by human beings in the course of a fully human life. As a purely philosophical exercise, what Kierkegaard offers is a kind of proto-Husserlian phenomenology, if only to the extent that he is attempting to speak more honestly about the conditions under which knowing is achieved. The ‘movement’ of thought is thus, in a sense, as much available to the secular philosopher as the Christian theologian, and both are able—if they have the courage to admit it—to recognize a basic disjuncture in the relation of our intellectual constructions to the lives which produce them.

We would be mistaken, however, if we read this Kierkegaardian ‘phenomenology’ as merely an internal exercise—the self attempting to generate either a rationality based on universal perception or a highly-personalised rationality sufficient to satisfy its own mind, quite apart from any broader connection to reality. Too much philosophy and theology operate under the assumption that their theories are creating something as coherent as a *Weltanschauung*. We are indeed operating from a ‘point of view,’ but the problem is not the post-modern concern that from this limited perspective our portrait of the world is occluded. The problem—for Kierkegaard—is that we are fundamentally incapable of occupying anything as stable as a ‘point.’ The division within our knowing is thus not between the internal representation and the external world, but within our internal representations. It is a division between the self-important babble we call ‘knowing’ and the reality of what it would mean to have one’s concrete existence oriented in an activity which could be called ‘knowing’.

¹⁶⁵ *KW 15*, 217.

¹⁶⁶ *KW 17*, 47.

This purely philosophical way of putting the situation, however, is of course more sensible if placed within the christological paradigm which motivated Kierkegaard's work. Philosophically, even our perception of our lives as in motion is susceptible to the same skepticism which has haunted philosophy since Descartes. The claim only really draws credibility in relation to the 'moment', i.e. in relation to the occurrence and the efficaciousness of divine activity. As much as we may perceive ourselves living in a flow of time, it is actually the disjuncture for the Christian between life before and after the appearance of the divine moment that permits us to speak of something like a past and future.

The basis for speaking properly about the Absolute is thus assumption into this divine action, not in the single blink of an eye, but as it approaches again and again. Another name for this assumption up into divine action is discipleship. It is the biblical way of which Kierkegaard speaks, the life of immediate fidelity to God which is exemplified by Christ. This exemplification is not direct; it does not yield an immediately intelligible moral language by which the Christian life is guided. It is indirect, and so our participation in it is also indirect, caught up in the movement towards a *telos* which also appears as a repeated subversion of our own capacity to identify the terms of this movement.

True speech about God is thus located along this movement. It is true when it is, in a divinely-initiated moment, united with God's own speaking. For Kierkegaard, however, this union is never positively available. He gives his most explicit account of this movement of discipleship in his *Upbuilding Discourses*. "To follow, then, means to walk along the same road walked by the one whom one is following."¹⁶⁷ That might be a general definition, but "to *follow Christ* means to take up one's cross" and "to carry one's cross means to deny oneself."¹⁶⁸ The abnegation of self is replaced with the task of following a path set ahead, "to *walk the same road* Christ walked in the lowly form of a servant, indigent, forsaken, mocked, not loving the world and not loved by it."¹⁶⁹

Here, however, we reach the end of what Kierkegaard can offer us for building an account of the theological task after discipleship. For Kierkegaard there is not much more to say positively

¹⁶⁷ *KW 15*, 219.

¹⁶⁸ *KW 15*, 221.

¹⁶⁹ *KW 15*, 223.

about this way than that it places one in struggle, in the unfolding *Anfechtung* of obedience to God. To see the path Christ has set is, for Kierkegaard, necessarily not to see Christ himself, to experience an absence, to be aware “that he is no longer visibly walking ahead.”¹⁷⁰ The life of the disciple is thus an ultimate solitude. There is help available, but “invisibly,” and this means then “to learn to walk by oneself, because it means to learn to conform one’s mind to the mind of the teacher, who is, however, invisible.”¹⁷¹ This is by no means joyless. There is the certainty that Christ “has gone *ahead*, and this is the follower’s joyful hope: that he is to follow him.”¹⁷² Yet we cannot expect from Kierkegaard any further guidance on what might be contained in this following, or how we might be availed of this invisible help.

In the larger scope of this thesis’ project, Kierkegaard’s work serves to enhance the problems and possibilities of theological language after discipleship. It is the very nature of discipleship which causes him to question whether truth can be captured in mere language. This is a challenge to theology as we typically understand it, of course, because theology is attempting to linguistically represent God. Like Pascal, Kierkegaard begins an account of discipleship with the overthrow of ideology in place of the concretion of Christ. This concretion is not only a challenge to the disciple’s expectation, but to the entire edifice of conceptualization in which ideology is formed.

At the same time, Kierkegaard’s account of the epistemic effects of discipleship should immediately exclude one manifestation of ideology in the form of an unchallenged moralism. To speak of discipleship as a grounds for theology is not to suggest that theology can only be done by theologians who have ticked the right boxes on an ethical or political checklist. To the contrary, Kierkegaard clearly locates the entire ethical sphere—and particularly an easy, culturally-bound moralism, regardless of whether it considers itself ‘liberal’, ‘conservative’, or otherwise—as products of the Hegelian consciousness which the ultimate and the concrete both undermine at every turn.

We are equally mistaken, however, if we assume that Kierkegaard’s alternative to supposedly ‘objective’ rational or ethical standards is a merely private relativism. Kierkegaard is philosophy’s great advocate for subjectivity, but we should not read ‘subjectivity’ to mean either an

¹⁷⁰ *KW 15*, 219.

¹⁷¹ *KW 15*, 220.

¹⁷² *KW 15*, 227.

affirmation of personal experience or an affirmation of private representation. Subjectivity is the heightened awareness of the conditions of our philosophising, and in that sense is a necessary step along the way, but is not thereby an unqualified assert a philosophical grounds for ourselves. Subjectivity is the parallel to Kierkegaard's irony. Kierkegaard is indeed an ironist, but his irony is intended not as an obfuscation of reality, but as the imposition of reality against language. In the words of Diogenes Allen, "It is misleading to think of Kierkegaard himself as an existentialist. Existentialism is concerned to describe how a human being may become properly human. Kierkegaard is concerned with how one may become a Christian."¹⁷³

3.10 Conclusion

In section 1.2, we contrasted the approach of liberation theologians like Clodovis Boff to the more magisterial orthodoxy of John Milbank on the question of how to relate theory to praxis in theological discourse. Recall that the disagreement—put simply—was over the nature of theology as a meta-level frame of reference for understanding praxis. Liberation theology assumed liberative praxis to be a part of an even larger domain of humanist action and reflection, with theology offering one example of a discourse which could motivate fresh action and previously unconsidered reflections. Traditional theology assumed that Christian discourse was the larger domain according to which one could make sense of the varieties of humanist thought and discern a best course of action within them.

From Pascal and Kierkegaard, we have established a third option standing outside of the spectrum defined by the first two. Rather than assuming that praxis is a fundamentally human domain—which must either submit itself to or assert its authority against the abstract 'theory' of theological discourse—discipleship assumes that action is the media in which God has disclosed God's self. Praxis, therefore, cannot be thought of as merely the application of prior theoretical rumination, nor can it be thought of as the merely immanent, concrete, 'here and now' of reality which theology must grudgingly accommodate. Praxis is the field of God's transcendence. In our participation in God's activity, we are giving primacy to God's self-disclosure without assuming that this self-disclosure occurs within the enclosed realm of ideology.

¹⁷³ Diogenes Allen, *Three Outsiders* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1983), 56.

Together, Pascal and Kierkegaard leave us with this chastening of linguistic representation as the field in which God can be analogically known. Both search for a way to communicate the insufficiency of words, using words. For Pascal, the notion of *coutume* suggests a different plane on which this argument will be made, in much the same way that Kierkegaard's notion of irony is perpetually drawing the listener into the truth by refusing to pretend that the truth is something which can be plainly spoken.

This chastening of human reason from both Pascal and Kierkegaard has not been followed by much in the way of a fuller positive of reasoning along the way of discipleship. In a sense, this is entirely appropriate, because to pretend that we can give a detailed account in advance is to replace future obedience with a present representation born of abstraction. This is the dilemma which discipleship leaves us in, so far. We are called to the imitation of the inimitable one, the perfection of being in the same distress as the one who "learned obedience through what he suffered" and was "made perfect."¹⁷⁴ This dilemma is ethical and spiritual, but it is also intellectual. We are called to speak about the unspeakable, and thus should be less than confident about the conclusions we draw, even while we speak confidently precisely because in speaking we are being drawn into activity of God. From Pascal, we learn that the call of God means losing one's prior certainties. From Kierkegaard, we learn that this call launches us into an ongoing uncertainty, a purgative movement of being approached by God even as we think we are approaching. But there may be something more positive which can be added after this grand and relentless negation, and for that we turn to a third and final voice, to yet another iconoclastic Lutheran.

¹⁷⁴ Heb. 5:8-9

Chapter 4

Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Discipleship in its Relation to *Christus praesens*

4.1 Introduction

There is a sense in which, following on from Pascal and Kierkegaard, the notion of discipleship with which we are working remains mere concept, a term necessary to fill a gap in an equation. It is not yet something defined at the level of concretion in which the follower of Christ lives. In order to advance in that direction, this chapter will consider the work of the German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a theological thinker profoundly reckoning with the choices facing Christians in his day.

This chapter will focus on two aspects of Bonhoeffer's own engagement. The first is his expectation that discipleship might provide a grounds for knowledge by providing a vantage from which to understand the will and intention of God. But in order for this claim to carry full weight as a broader epistemological statement, it is necessary, secondly, to understand the christological account of ontology on which Bonhoeffer's work is built. The aim of this chapter is thus to consider the implications of discipleship as the venue for participation in the being of revelation. What does this entail not only for an account of knowledge, but for a more concrete description of how discipleship is to be pursued?

Insofar as this thesis is interested in discipleship as a new way of addressing the relation of theory and praxis in theological thought, Bonhoeffer's account more resolutely abolishes what seems to be an intuitive line between theory and praxis, locating the origin of both in the primacy of the Incarnation. As such, it is the continuing human life of the resurrected Christ, the ongoing activity of the living God, which is the real locus of divine self-disclosure, and the

space in which the disciple comes to use theological language truly only in virtue of that action's conformity to the action of God.¹

4.2 Background

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's work is equally as fragmented as Kierkegaard's, though perhaps due more to circumstance than intent. Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) understood himself as a theologian, and yet never attempted a systematic reproduction of Christian thought. The broader implications of his theology, therefore, have to be read indirectly, via his attentiveness to particular issues he faced within the German *Kirchenkampf*.²

The son of a prominent Berlin psychiatrist, Bonhoeffer achieved an impressive list of academic accomplishments by a young age. By 25, he had published his doctorate and habilitation, was ordained as a minister in the Prussian church, and had already begun lecturing as a *Privatdozent* in Berlin. While gaining his academic credentials, he was also deeply involved in pastoral work, having been profoundly affected by experiences serving a German congregation in Barcelona and working with university students and catechetical classes for young people in Berlin. As the German church began to wrestle with its own relation to the nationalism growing in the country over 1931-32, Bonhoeffer's work at the intersection of theological academia and the church immersed him in the debate. Shortly after Hitler's ascent to power in January, 1933, Bonhoeffer left academia—voluntarily, at first, though later he would be forbidden from lecturing—first to take up a pastorate with a German congregation in London. He continued weighing in on arguments dividing the church—albeit it at a distance—and developed a reputation as a hardliner in his opposition to the Nazi government's influence on the church.

Following his return from London in 1935, Bonhoeffer took a position directing a seminary for preachers being trained by the Confessing Church. This period of his life produced his most popular theological books, *Nachfolge* (1937) and *Gemeinsames Leben* (1939), and drew him deeply into the implications of discipleship for shaping the church's response to Germany's

¹ Quotations in German from Bonhoeffer's writing in this chapter are entirely taken from Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke (DBW). Quotations in English from Bonhoeffer's writings in this chapter are entirely taken from Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (DBWE). All translations from other German texts are my own and any errors are my own.

² The biographical sketch of Bonhoeffer's life in this section is drawn from Ferdinand Schlingensiepen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 1906-1945: Eine Biographie* (München: C.H. Beck, 2005) and Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Theologe, Christ, Zeitgenosse*, 6th ed. (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1986, originally published in 1967).

political crisis. By 1938, both the seminary and Bonhoeffer's teaching career had been ended by order of the state police, owing to his vocal criticism of the government. As war loomed, Bonhoeffer was eligible to be called up to military service. Seeking to avoid this, he was eventually connected via his brother-in-law to a position in the Abwehr, the German military intelligence. Bonhoeffer accepted this position in part because the Abwehr had become a hotbed of covert resistance to Hitler's regime, a resistance which Bonhoeffer had been increasingly intent on joining. His involvement in the circle of conspirators affiliated with the Abwehr gave him an awareness and an indirect role in a number of subversive activities, most notably in a plot to blow up Hitler's plane in March, 1943. The Gestapo, initially unaware of the failed attempt, was nonetheless investigating Bonhoeffer and others in the conspiratorial circle on suspicion of misusing funds (which they had, indeed, 'misused' in an effort to smuggle German Jews into Switzerland). Arrested in April, 1943, Bonhoeffer spent more than a year in prison merely awaiting trial. After the failure of the final plot to assassinate Hitler in July, 1944, however, the circle of conspirators was discovered. Bonhoeffer's role in the resistance eventually came to light, and he was executed along with several of his fellow conspirators on April 9, 1945.

This background is necessary for understanding Bonhoeffer's theological contribution, insofar as his own developing insights were largely shaped by the questions and needs presented by these challenges. Bonhoeffer's entire theological career bears some relation on the question of the church's relation to the task of proclaiming God's revelation. There can be no easy separation of discipleship's epistemic implications in Bonhoeffer's thought from either ecclesiology or an account of revelation. As such, we will consider a brief survey of the some of the relevant debates in the secondary literature on Bonhoeffer.

4.3 Review of the Literature on Bonhoeffer and Discipleship

The most extensive work on Bonhoeffer's understanding of discipleship has been done by Christiane Tietz and her student, Florian Schmitz.³ Tietz has focused more on the philosophical implications of discipleship, Schmitz more on the theological, but taken together they provide a useful introduction to some of the key issues at stake. Both understand the priority of discipleship as essential to Bonhoeffer's christology, and Bonhoeffer's christology as essential to

³ Christiane Tietz-Steiding, *Bonhoeffers Kritik der verkümmerten Vernunft: Eine erkenntnistheoretische Untersuchung* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999); Florian Schmitz, *"Nachfolge": Zur Theologie Dietrich Bonhoeffers* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2013).

his larger understanding of Christian reason. The question, for both, then, is how we should understand Bonhoeffer's christology in relation to his ecclesiology, and what this makes of the traditional claims of theology.

Schmitz begins with a more intensive focus on Bonhoeffer's book, *Nachfolge*, and "asks about the theology of the book itself," which he correctly notes has received insufficient attention on its own terms.⁴ Typically, the theology evident in *Nachfolge* is taken as a contrast with the theology evident in the unfinished *Ethik* manuscript of the early 1940's. Superficially, God's self-disclosure appeared to be limited to the church in the former, while it expanded to incorporate the whole of the world in the latter. For an earlier generation of Bonhoeffer scholars, the possibilities inherent in the latter proved more compelling, and the place of *Nachfolge* in Bonhoeffer's corpus has suffered from the resulting neglect. But Schmitz argues, convincingly, that "*Nachfolge* and *Ethik* do not diverge in the action of Jesus Christ in the world, nor in the action of Christians in the world."⁵ If there are differences to be discovered in these two phases of Bonhoeffer's thought, it is not in their basic theological assumptions.

Both phases of Bonhoeffer's thought find their origin in his christology. In both books:

"Christ is the reconciler of the whole world who urges Christians towards a life in the world. The notion that Christ's actions are exclusive or restricted to the space of the church does not appear across Bonhoeffer's works."⁶

What changes for Bonhoeffer between these two phases is "nothing in his conception of world or christology," but in his willingness to surrender a fixed notion of "the purity of Christian life."⁷ The underlying framework of Christ's self-disclosure did not change, in Schmitz's reading, but Bonhoeffer's willingness to admit that the work of Christ might lead him into the 'unholy' company of the conspirators did change.

So what is this underlying framework for understanding Christ's self-disclosure? Read through the agenda of *Nachfolge*, Schmitz begins with Bonhoeffer's notion of discipleship as "*Bindung*

⁴ Schmitz, *Nachfolge*, 11.

⁵ Schmitz, *Nachfolge*, 14.

⁶ Schmitz, *Nachfolge*, 14.

⁷ Schmitz, *Nachfolge*, 14.

an Christus”⁸—a commitment to Christ that is also an ontological fastening. *Bindung an Christus* should be “understood as a qualification of faith in Jesus Christ.”⁹ Discipleship thus expresses that faith should be properly understood as a “bodily commitment,” that faith “is a matter of the whole existence.”¹⁰ This ‘embodied’ notion of Christ’s self-disclosure thus turns us to “the primacy of the body of Christ.”¹¹

In this move, Schmitz recognizes that what we find in Bonhoeffer is a “*präsentischer Christologie*,”¹² a profound movement away from a “theology oriented around principles” and towards an understanding of “God’s word as living, here and now.”¹³ How do we understand God’s word as presently active without collapsing God’s word into whatever ideology presently reigns? Schmitz argues that Bonhoeffer understands the presence of the living Christ as an ecclesiological statement, the physical body of Christ connected directly to the biblical Body of Christ. It is fidelity to the church which constitutes discipleship’s embodiment for the Christian living today—“true faith is . . . only in the bodily *Bindung an Christus*, i.e. in the community of his Body. Faith understood without a corporeal communion with Christ is no faith at all.”¹⁴ While Schmitz understands discipleship as “advancing behind Jesus,”¹⁵ this ends up amounting to a fairly straightforward investment in the primacy of the church. The Christian’s faithfulness to the church is thus the essence of discipleship, a following after the “*Leibgemeinschaft*”¹⁶ which the ascended Christ has left behind for us:

Who are ‘the saints’? Those who belong to Jesus Christ, those who (before Christ’s Ascension) take the step into discipleship and follow Jesus, and those who (since Pentecost) have received baptism and thus visibly hold fast to the church of Christ.”¹⁷

⁸ *DBW 4*, 47.

⁹ Schmitz, *Nachfolge*, 38.

¹⁰ Schmitz, *Nachfolge*, 38.

¹¹ Schmitz, *Nachfolge*, 38.

¹² Schmitz, *Nachfolge*, 407.

¹³ Schmitz, *Nachfolge*, 37.

¹⁴ Schmitz, *Nachfolge*, 61.

¹⁵ Schmitz, *Nachfolge*, 37.

¹⁶ Schmitz, *Nachfolge*, 63.

¹⁷ Schmitz, *Nachfolge*, 144-5.

Read through *Nachfolge*, Bonhoeffer's prison theology—even when it seems radically unconcerned with, or even dismissive of, the church—is best understood as an attempt at ecclesial reform, calling the church “to come back to its own essence as church.”¹⁸ This is Bonhoeffer's chief contribution to a radical political theology, in Schmitz's view, that “the recovery of *der Nachfolge Christi*” is also “true faith as a form of resistance . . . the return of the church to the way of discipleship is also its way back to its substance.”¹⁹ The really radical political act thus becomes helping the church to be its true self.

In this way, Schmitz takes as seriously as possible the insights of Bonhoeffer's dissertation, *Sanctorum Communio* (1927), which suggested that the church itself could serve as the locus of act and being, the peculiar meeting place of transcendence and immanence, “Christ exists as *Gemeinde*,” but also “*vice versa die Kirche ist der Christus praesens*.”²⁰ Schmitz's reading of *Nachfolge* is thus also one way of picking up on a strand of thought from Bonhoeffer's early theses—found particularly in *Akt und Sein* (1931)—that the church is the solution to the problems inherent in understanding revelation as either entirely act or entirely being. The church-community is both, the being of God's act, the space of transcendence which abides in created reality. Discipleship is thus a form of embodied participation, but first as participation in the church's sacraments. It is therefore only indirectly a participation in the work of God, if one assumes that God's primary work in the present age is the sending of the Holy Spirit, and if one understands that the primary work of the Spirit is the establishment of the church.

Christiane Tietz has developed this same thought, but with a stronger awareness of the “ontological question”²¹ raised by the claim that the church could serve as the nexus of act and being. She writes that:

the church is not identical with Christ, since Christ has ascended to heaven, is now with God, and will one day reappear. The church is rather the form in which Christ is present today; it is the way of Christ that is accessible to us today.²²

¹⁸ Schmitz, *Nachfolge*, 404.

¹⁹ Schmitz, *Nachfolge*, 405.

²⁰ Schmitz, *Nachfolge*, 407.

²¹ Tietz, *Bonhoeffers Kritik*, 20.

²² Tietz, *Bonhoeffers Kritik*, 253.

Ontologically, however, this creates a situation which is easy to articulate, at first, but difficult to conceptualise under closer scrutiny. The church is Christ and is not Christ, is at some distance from Christ and yet remains ‘*die Form*’ in which Christ appears to us. The church is a being like all created beings, and yet somehow possesses something of transcendence. Tietz argues that Bonhoeffer:

defines the mode of being of revelation as neither an act nor a being, but as a third thing existing in limbo between the two, namely, as the person-community of the church constituted by the Christ-person, or the (as Bonhoeffer can also say) being of the church constituted through transcendent being.²³

This notion of the church’s being as constituting a kind of third layer between the realm of Creator and created is a provocative insight, although Tietz seems uncertain about exactly what to make of it. Complicating the issue is her acknowledgement that, at points in his later work, Bonhoeffer seems to be saying that the church is not itself this *tertium quid*, but is also divided internally, as with the rest of creation, riven by a transcendent being even more basic than its own existence.²⁴

Tietz’s primary aim, however, is not to develop a full-fledged ontology, but to consider the implications of this claim for human reason. In the early theses, the same middle ground occupied by the church is also occupied by the justified Christian—“the mode of being of the new human is neither being nor pure act, but must be understood as a third thing in limbo between the two, namely, as given through Christ.”²⁵ This results in a critique of the reasoning of the ‘old human,’ under Adam—“the thought of humanity in Adam is, like the human being itself, curved into itself and possessive of all thought.”²⁶ Tietz’s work never quite moves beyond this epistemological insight to fully take up the ontological problem she has glimpsed but not engaged. She admits, in conclusion, that she does not see in Bonhoeffer’s ontology any more “positive force”²⁷ than the critical function it plays in critiquing reason.

²³ Tietz, *Bonhoeffers Kritik*, 301.

²⁴ Tietz, *Bonhoeffers Kritik*, 237.

²⁵ Tietz, *Bonhoeffers Kritik*, 309.

²⁶ Tietz, *Bonhoeffers Kritik*, 314.

²⁷ Tietz, *Bonhoeffers Kritik*, 314.

The aim of this present chapter is to give Bonhoeffer's ontological insight more positive force than Tietz allows. The argument here is that the emphasis on trying to resolve Bonhoeffer's ontology by reference to his ecclesiology has actually confused the issue. The church is one place where Bonhoeffer's ontological insights are manifest, not the origin of his ontology. The church is, self-evidently, not its true self. The *Gemeinde* on which the early Bonhoeffer pinned his hopes is muddled by its relation to the visible *Kirche*, a fact which—as we shall see—Bonhoeffer became more attuned to in his later work. To forcefully insist that the sinful church simply is already its true self—and thus can serve as the basis for understanding a third ontological strata—is unhelpful. If the notion of a 'third' category of transcendent being is to be helpful, it cannot be defined by the church. Better to understand the present *Kirche* repeatedly subverted by the union of divine and human which is the *Gemeinde*, rather than to assert the *Kirche* as the place where *Gemeinde* is mysteriously abiding.

Tietz and Schmitz's perspective on the location of discipleship in relation to a "*christologischer Ekklesiologie*"²⁸ draws from the earlier work of Clifford Green, at least insofar as Green brought Bonhoeffer's theses to closer scholarly attention and argued for their position as the lens through which Bonhoeffer's work should be read. Rather than drawing from the early theses an insistence on the primacy of the church, Green broadened this perspective to argue that "Bonhoeffer consistently developed his theology in a *social* conceptuality."²⁹ The meeting place of act and being becomes not the *Kirche*, per se, but the mutual interrelationality of human beings exemplified in the idea of the *Gemeinde*. This way of conceptualizing Bonhoeffer's work contained its own set of problems, particularly—as Wayne Floyd would later point out—over whether we should understand God's ontological self-disclosure as related to sociality more in unity or more in difference.³⁰ The most robust solution to this tension has been offered by Charles Marsh, who proposes reconfiguring our anthropology such that "an I no longer exists for itself but exists in connection to an other person on the way toward becoming a we, and in this sense the I becomes truly an I."³¹ Christ-existing-as-church-community thus calls

²⁸ Schmitz, *Nachfolge*, 407.

²⁹ Clifford J. Green, *Bonhoeffer: A Theology of Sociality*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 294, emphasis in original.

³⁰ Wayne W. Floyd, *Theology and the Dialectics of Otherness: On Reading Bonhoeffer and Adorno* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1988).

³¹ Charles Marsh, *Reclaiming Dietrich Bonhoeffer: The Promise of His Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 156.

humans to true personhood, but only by drawing them out of themselves into loving community. Ontologically, then, Marsh insists that Christ's being must be present, for it is only "the presence of Christ as community that enacts the metanoia of the new being."³² But he is somewhat cagey about the details of the ontological relation between Christ's being to the being of community. The closest he comes to defining the relationship is when he writes that, "Christ exists as the luminescence of agapeic togetherness."³³ While a beautiful image, it is not obvious in what sense 'togetherness' can be understood as 'luminescent,' and so it is never entirely clear what this indicates for Christ's own being. Does Christ exist as a quality of togetherness? Does Christ make use of togetherness to illuminate himself? No further clarification is provided.

While Tietz and Marsh both draw from Bonhoeffer's early theses, their attempts to draw deeper ontological implications from the theses wander off in different directions. In part, this is because ontology is neither's principal concern—Tietz is exploring the epistemological implications of Bonhoeffer's work, Marsh is more concerned with the social and ethical dimensions. Both can agree that epistemology and ethics are both shaped by the immediacy of Christ's presence. For Tietz, this means that the church exemplifies "a third mode of being beyond Seiendes and Nichtseiendes."³⁴ For Marsh, this means that the church exemplifies a process of interpersonal becoming, initiated by Christ and related to him in some kind of ongoing fashion.

This chapter will explore the possibility that discipleship in Bonhoeffer's work captures the best of both options. Discipleship becomes a responsiveness to the immediacy of Christ. This immediacy is exemplified not only in sociality, but in the fullness of eschatological reunion between Creation and creator that we call the Kingdom of God. This reunion is present now, but not immediately available. It is the continuous work of Christ through the Spirit towards the Father's ends. But this work, rather than being self-evident, is quite the opposite. The present work of Christ is precisely what is necessary to obscure our understanding, the presence of Christ himself confusing the isolated sphere of our supposedly complete understanding of the world. Discipleship, as action in conformity with the work of Christ, thus becomes the only vantage from which something more positive can be said about God than this obscurity would

³² Marsh, *Reclaiming Bonhoeffer*, 153.

³³ Marsh, *Reclaiming Bonhoeffer*, 151.

³⁴ Christiane Tietz, "Bonhoeffer on the Ontological Structure of the Church," in *Ontology and Ethics: Bonhoeffer and Contemporary Scholarship*, eds. Adam C. Clark and Michael Mawson (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2013): 32-46, on p. 42.

otherwise permit. Discipleship thus combines Tietz's epistemic concerns and Marsh's ethical concerns. It not only responds to a third ontological strata between Creature and created, but gives primacy entirely to the action of the already revealed God-human. It does call us into becoming ourselves, only by virtue of discipleship engaging us in the movement towards God's end.

In order to describe discipleship in Bonhoeffer's work, we will begin not with Bonhoeffer's early theses, but at the place where his christological instincts reach their maturity, in his 1933 christology lectures and his *Ethik* manuscript. The question of how the present activity of Christ can be known and proclaimed is an intensely practical one for Bonhoeffer, as he sought through the 1930's to press the church towards a more radical participation in divine resistance to growing Nazi power. As such, we will examine Bonhoeffer's waxing and waning hopes for the church's proclamation across the 1930's. This will lead us up to the 1940's, where Bonhoeffer begins to write about Christian discipleship as not solely the church's province, and indeed as something occasionally antithetical to the church. The particular focus of this last section will be on the transitional years of 1938-1941, in which Bonhoeffer's wrestling with how best to discern and proclaim the work of Christ eventually led him into resistance with the Abwehr.

4.4 The Christology of the 1933 Lectures

4.4.1 Data from the primary sources

Though he didn't know it at the time, in the summer of 1933 Bonhoeffer was nearing the end of his brief career in formal academia. The lectures he presented at the University of Berlin over that semester are the closest thing we have to an explicit formulation of his own dogmatic christology. Only a few pages of Bonhoeffer's own notes are extant, but the content of the lectures has been reconstructed from a number of different students' notes.³⁵ Insofar as many different interpreters have agreed with John Godsey's assessment that christology in the work of Bonhoeffer is "the center of his concern and the *terminus a quo* of his thinking,"³⁶ it would be worth considering what larger commitments are entailed in Bonhoeffer's understanding of Christ.

³⁵ For more details on this process, see the editors' note, *DBWE 12*, 279.

³⁶ John Godsey, *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (London: SCM Press, 1960), 17.

The problem of christology as a theological ‘science’ is the problem of its object. Where does one turn to find the ‘real’ Christ which christology is meant to investigate? To the scriptural community? To the historical record? To the claims of the creeds? Bonhoeffer’s christology begins by sketching the unsuitability of these means for actually bringing us into knowledge of Christ.³⁷ Bonhoeffer’s preference is to begin instead with the bare reality of the living Christ. This claim, however, threatens to undermine christology as a ‘science,’ and in fact threatens the whole of theology and epistemology as rule-bound disciplines.³⁸

All of the supposedly objective, scholarly approaches place Christ before “the immanent logos of human beings.”³⁹ “But what happens,” Bonhoeffer asks:

if the counter Logos suddenly presents its demand in a wholly new form, so that it is no longer an idea or a word that is turned against the autonomy of the logos, but rather the counter Logos appears, somewhere and at some time in history, as a human being, and as a human being sets itself up as judge over the human logos and says, “I am the truth,” I am the death of the human logos, I am the life of God’s Logos, I am the Alpha and the Omega?⁴⁰

The proper starting point for christology is not the question of how knowledge about Christ is to be obtained. It is the presence of the living Christ who necessitates a theological account, and so christology can only be occupied with the question, “Who are you? Are you God’s very self?”⁴¹ This question turns back against the asker, it “interrogates the very existence of the one asking it . . . If the person asking must hear, in reply, that his or her own logos has reached its limits, then the questioner has encountered the boundaries of his or her own existence.”⁴² To engage in christology—or theology more broadly—is actually to find oneself examined by Christ, to become subject to judgment.

³⁷ *DBWE 12*, 301.

³⁸ The implications of Bonhoeffer’s christology for a fundamental ontology was a subject I explored in my masters thesis. For more, see Patrick Dunn, “‘To Know the Real One’: Christological Promeity in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer” (masters thesis: Stellenbosch University, 2015).

³⁹ *DBWE 12*, 302.

⁴⁰ *DBWE 12*, 302.

⁴¹ *DBWE 12*, 302.

⁴² *DBWE 12*, 303.

This is not an intuitive claim, and Bonhoeffer does not intend it to be so. It places before us “the question of one’s existence” as “the question of transcendence.”⁴³ Or, put another way, it asks whether human knowledge only achieves its potential—only situates itself rightly with respect to reality—once it accepts its limitations. It is in this sense that Bonhoeffer understands “the christological question” as “the central question of all knowledge.”⁴⁴ As we noted with Blaise Pascal, for Bonhoeffer the limitation on the scope of human reason is less reached by human exploration than imposed by divine grace. That which is able to impose such a limit cannot itself be a mere idea or mere act of will, lest it find itself overrun and absorbed into the human intellect’s appropriation of all reality. But in *Christus praesens*, we have a “counter Word,” who, “though it has been killed, raises itself from the dead as the living, eternal, ultimate, conquering Word of God . . . rises up to meet its murderers and rushes at them again, appearing as the Resurrected One who has overcome death.”⁴⁵

What Bonhoeffer is suggesting is not that the presence of Christ is or should be obvious. Indeed, in his mind, it is the presence of the transcendent Christ which guarantees that there will never be a universally-accepted method for demonstrating the truth of this claim. Instead, we would be better off understanding Bonhoeffer as proposing that *Christus praesens* offers the condition in which human reason properly finding its true nature by accepting its boundaries and orienting itself towards its proper *telos*. The present Christ is the epistemic *a priori*. He is not only the unconceived thought, but the unconceivable thought, precisely because, as person, he is no thought at all. To run up against our confusion is to run up against the very presence of Christ. Much depends on whether we will admit this confusion as absolute and eternal, or convince ourselves that it is merely a temporary obstacle to be navigated around on the journey to perfect knowledge of the universe.

Framing christology in this way places at its start—and at the start of knowledge—“the question of *who*” and thus, “the question of *being*, of the essence and nature of Christ.”⁴⁶ We will only understand the situation in which human reason finds itself once we understand who this Christ has revealed himself to be. The confrontation with transcendent being discloses Christ

⁴³ *DBWE 12*, 303.

⁴⁴ *DBWE 12*, 304.

⁴⁵ *DBWE 12*, 305.

⁴⁶ *DBWE 12*, 304, emphasis in original.

“as present in time and space . . . *nunc et hic*.”⁴⁷ As such, in his willingness to draw near to us, Christ has revealed himself to be *pro nobis*, for us—“*sein Christus—Sein ist sein Pro-me—Sein*”⁴⁸—his being Christ is also his being for me. As an ontological claim, this entails three important implications. The first is that it is only after the encounter with *Christus praesens* that we will have any useful scaffolding for propping up human reason. The second is that, given this fact, it is the structure of Christ’s own being which will have to provide the structure for our understanding of human reason. The third is that, in acknowledging Christ as the present God-human, we are also forced to acknowledge the inseparability of transcendence and immanence, of divine revelation and human personhood, prior to our attempts to articulate them as independent. Christ’s being present to us is a statement about his being. There is no other—and never has been any other—Christ than the one who is alive and for us. Because he is present, the usurping Logos “compels the statement that Jesus is wholly human, as well as the other statement that Jesus is wholly God—otherwise he would not be present.”⁴⁹ As *pro nobis*, the God-human is even more perfectly creature than we are, and even more perfectly the revelation of God than any abstract notion of deity.

Within the frame of historical debates about christology, the priority of the God-human has further consequences. To begin with, it places us more explicitly and concretely within the realm of a Lutheran christology. This relation has been alluded to throughout this thesis, but now takes a more obvious role. Bonhoeffer frequently quotes from Luther’s Ascension Day sermon, “When he was on earth, he was far away from us here. Now that he is far from earth, he is near to us.”⁵⁰ The concretion of this Lutheran claim about Christ’s presence is the eucharist, and so Bonhoeffer dives deeply into—what he reads as—Luther’s attempt to navigate sacramentology between two unappetizing extremes. Both of these extremes attempt to articulate in different ways the ‘how’ of Christ’s presence in the elements. On the one hand, there is the doctrine of ubiquity, which permanently elevates the substance of the elements—if not their accidents—into the divine life. On the other hand, there is the doctrine of ubivolipresence, which makes Christ’s presence in the elements contingent on his will in a moment to make these elements his body and blood. To these two options, Bonhoeffer understands Luther arguing that:

⁴⁷ *DBWE 12*, 310.

⁴⁸ *DBWE 12*, 295.

⁴⁹ *DBWE 12*, 312.

⁵⁰ *DBWE 12*, 312.

Both doctrines are impossible metaphysical hypostatizations. In each of them, one element of the reality has been isolated and made into a system. Neither the one statement nor the other does justice to the facts of the matter, which must include the being-there-for-you and the being-*there*-for-you of Christ. The doctrine of ubiquity teaches an existence of Christ outside revelation. In this way, revelation becomes an incidental state of an existing substance. The ubivolipresence teaches the presence of Christ not as a characterization of his person but rather as a promise, derived from Jesus's words, of his will to be present. Both fail to understand Christ's presence as Christ's way of being.⁵¹

Essentially, we have in this response the whole of Bonhoeffer's wrestling with act and being writ small. Has God united God's self in some hidden way with the foundational structure of reality, as the doctrine of ubiquity—and the being at the heart of Thomistic metaphysics—would suggest? Or is God disclosed only at the moment when God freely chooses to make use of reality, as the doctrine of ubivolipresence—and the act at the heart of Reformed thought up to Barth's early work—would suggest?

Bonhoeffer, *pace* Luther, argues that the true primacy of Christ as the revelation of the God-human does not answer these questions so much as it renders them impossible. There is no access to an isolated divinity, nor an isolated humanity. The *a priori* which makes rational thought possible is the addressing, usurping presence of Christ, and only out of this presence can we begin to construct anything resembling definitions of human or God. Try as we might to organize christology around ideas about human nature, divine nature, and their interpenetration, all our ideas appeal to something other than Christ, to “the human word . . . in the form of an idea,” when Christ approaches as “the living Word to humankind.”⁵²

What does this mean, practically, for our attempts to discern the activity of Christ? Preliminarily, at this stage, Bonhoeffer suggests that the only entry into this more practical discussion is first the genuine recognition that Christ is both the center and the limit of human thought:

⁵¹ *DBWE 12*, 321-2.

⁵² *DBWE 12*, 316.

“Where does he stand? For me, he stands in my place, where I should be standing. He stands there because I cannot, that is, he stands at the boundary of my existence and nevertheless in my place. This is an expression of the fact that I am separated, by a boundary that I cannot cross, from the self that I ought to be. This boundary lies between my old self and my new self, that is, in the center between myself and me. As the limit, Christ is at the same time the center that I have regained. As boundary, the boundary can only be seen from its other side, outside the limit. Thus it is important that we human beings, in recognizing that our limit is in Christ, at the same time see that in this limit we have found our new center.”⁵³

We have here, as a first step, something akin to the Thomistic distinction between essence and existence. Creation stands at some distance from its true nature. It exists, but its essence is obscured by sin. This essence stands united to Christ, and thus awaits its eschatological disclosure in the reconciliation of our present existence to God’s intention in Christ. Bonhoeffer indirectly accepts the Thomistic description of the problem. But, as we shall see later in the chapter, his solution to the problem looks much different than the Catholic, Aristotelian, teleological strategy for human reason presently discerning the true nature of creation.

For now, we should note that the origin of this difference begins in Bonhoeffer’s christology with his embrace of the Lutheran *sub contrario*, i.e. that on the cross, the goodness of God appears under the aspect of its opposite. Bonhoeffer frames this problem in terms of the “stumbling block”⁵⁴ that is “the humiliation of Christ.”⁵⁵ Human reason expects that, if God is revealed in Christ, then Christ will appear as glorified. But the scandal to human reason is God’s appearing as humiliated. The intellectual barrier is not between the human and God, but between the human and *this* God, disgraced on the cross. Given the priority of the God-human, the central epistemological question is thus no longer how human reason can cross the gap to divine truth, but how human reason can be freed from its ideation to recognize the basic unity of divine truth with reason’s own essence.

⁵³ *DBWE 12*, 324.

⁵⁴ *DBWE 12*, 313.

⁵⁵ *DBWE 12*, 314.

Even once this freedom is granted, however, divine truth does not become an object for the redeemed mind to ponder any more than it was for the mind under Adam. It is simply not the truth's nature to be object, but to be person, and to be the particularity of a person whose action does not abide by the categories in which the human mind attempts to place it. Christ, the Absolute, remains both "the Resurrected One, that is, the Exalted One," and "at the same time . . . the humiliated Christ."⁵⁶ Thus, embedded even into the redeemed reason is the incapacity to wholly appropriate truth as object. And, embedded into the presence of Christ, as we shall see, is the call to follow, and thus only then to find oneself properly situated with respect to both the revealedness and the hiddenness of truth.

4.4.2 Observations

Bonhoeffer's contribution to our understanding of theology after discipleship will undoubtedly be christocentric, but that can mean many things. The ontological structure which arises from Bonhoeffer's christology is one essential piece of the puzzle. It is a comprehensive claim about both the structure of reality and the epistemological position of humanity in relation to that reality. Three features stand out thus far.

First, there is no circumventing the particularity of Christ as the origin of Bonhoeffer's claims. The Incarnation provides the only thing approaching a groundwork for understanding of the relation of nature to grace. But this does not mean that the Incarnation can be understood as static principle, as a mere assumption that God abides in ontological solidarity with reality as we understand it. Bonhoeffer's vision of the Incarnation is much more particular than that. Instead, the Incarnation is available only in light of our confrontation with the present God-human, a confrontation first appearing to us as the interrogation of our finitude.

This leads to the second point, that the limit of our reason is imposed by the presence of Christ, and thus Christ is to be understood as alive and active. Definitions of divine, of human, and in fact of all language find their origin in this reality which defies expectation and convention. It defies expectation by being perpetually active, by being perpetually person, and thus surpassing any pre-defined, categorical ideas in which we intend to place it. At the same time, however, this movement of Christ is also the movement of the Kingdom, it is the ever-shifting

⁵⁶ *DBWE 12*, 314.

alignment of creation with the movement of God's activity towards the eschaton. It can thus be neither abstracted from nor defined by our experience of empirical reality.

Thirdly, in its freedom as person and in its complexity as the restoration of the whole of creation, the activity of Christ defies any attempt at simply viewing it, understanding it, charting its origin and flow. It can only be participated in. This participation, while essential, still does not provide the formulaic epistemological standards for appropriating truth which we crave. Insofar as the Christian participates in both the exaltation and the humiliation of Christ, she cannot help but admit that, at times, her experience of ignorance is as much the 'correct' and 'true' epistemic position as her experience of insight. At every point, it is Christ who is true. The position from which knowledge is justified not a particular orientation of statement to fact, but an orientation of the whole human life to the intention of God. It is this orientation which we refer to, here, as discipleship.

Already we have alluded to the notion of 'participation' in God's activity, which Bonhoeffer's 1933 lectures gesture towards but never fully develop. In order to locate in his thought more substance to this claim, we will now take a brief excursion into the *Ethik* manuscript, where Bonhoeffer's christological convictions more concretely meet the question of human activity in the world.

4.5 *Ethik* and the Possibility of Divine Participation

4.5.1 Data from the primary sources

Bonhoeffer's *Ethik* survives not as a book, but as a series of thirteen manuscripts, most of them first drafts of ideas and arguments that might have eventually found their way into a completed work.⁵⁷ Although the dating is difficult, indications are that the manuscripts were composed in short bursts stretching from the autumn of 1940 all the way until Bonhoeffer's arrest in April, 1943.⁵⁸ As such, *Ethik* provides an indirect insight into the theological rationale behind Bonhoeffer's decision to participate in the resistance against Hitler. Given its fragmentary nature, it's impossible to glean a single, systematic line of argumentation, nor to even be certain

⁵⁷ Clifford J. Green, "Editor's Introduction to the English Edition," *DBWE* 6, 25.

⁵⁸ Green, "Introduction," *DBWE* 6, 30.

whether the arguments we have now are not merely provisional, subject to a revision Bonhoeffer was never able to give them. Nonetheless, for our purposes, *Ethik* provides a window into the direction of Bonhoeffer's christological development as he attempted to give more substance to Christian thought and action in response to *Christus praesens*.

The section entitled, "Christ, Reality, and the Good," gives us the most explicit connection between the logic of *Ethik* and the insights of the 1933 lectures. Bonhoeffer sets up what he sees as an inherent contradiction in speaking about a Christian ethic:

Those who wish even to focus on the problem of a Christian ethic are faced with an outrageous demand—from the outset they must give up, as inappropriate to this topic, the very two questions that led them to deal with the ethical problem: "How can I be good?" and "How can I do something good?" Instead they must ask the wholly other, completely different question: what is the will of God?⁵⁹

The field of ethical debate makes reference to abstract conceptions—the 'good' or the 'justice'—which are presumed to represent a universal, an ideal quality which can be applied to a variety of actions or actors. But for the Christian, the good can never be circumscribed by a static, platonic ideal. The good only makes sense as a description of God's own action, and thus goodness is not something to be ascribed to good, but discovered in God's action, a predicate of the unfolding revelation of God's will and intent. Consequently, "the source of a Christian ethic is not the reality of one's own self, not the reality of the world, nor is it the reality of norms and values. It is the reality of God that is revealed in Jesus Christ."⁶⁰ The Christian's own action is thus to be reflective of God's own action, which is also to say, the reality of the world's true self as it exists under the reign and will of God. The whole of what can be said of a Christian ethic thus reduces to this point, that "*to participate in the indivisible whole of God's reality is the meaning of the Christian question about the good.*"⁶¹

The pressing question for a Christian ethic is therefore not, 'what must my action or intention contain in order to be considered good?' The question is rather, 'how can I discern what God

⁵⁹ DBWE 6, 47.

⁶⁰ DBWE 6, 49.

⁶¹ DBWE 6, 53, emphasis in original.

is doing—what the reality of the world under God’s reign looks like—so that I might participate in it?’ The answer to this new question is not any more obvious than the answer to the first, but it does orient the Christian’s discernment around the particularity of Christ, the person in whom the reality of God is perfectly disclosed:

In Christ we are invited to participate in the reality of God and the reality of the world at the same time, the one not without the other. The reality of God is disclosed only as it places me completely into the reality of the world. But I find the reality of the world always already borne, accepted, and reconciled in the reality of God. That is the mystery of the revelation of God in the human being Jesus Christ. The Christian ethic asks, then, how this reality of God and of the world that is given in Christ becomes real in our world.⁶²

And thus we have the starting point for the ethical question. The debate is oriented around what resources we have, practically, for locating the appearance of God’s reality—and thus true reality—in the middle of the obscurity that is our experience of what we call reality.

In a number of the *Ethik* manuscripts, Bonhoeffer experiments with various criteria by which the present activity of Christ could be known. He attempts, for instance, to recapture “the concept of the natural,” which “has fallen into disrepute in Protestant ethics.”⁶³ By ‘natural’, Bonhoeffer here means nature as it was intended in creation, as it exists in God’s reality. Where can this true nature be found amidst the fallen creation in which we live?

How is the natural recognized? The natural is that form of life preserved by God for the fallen world that is directed toward justification, salvation, and renewal through Christ. The natural therefore is determined both formally and according to its content. Formally, the natural is determined by the preserving will of God and by its orientation toward Christ. Its formal side, then, can only be recognized by looking at Jesus Christ. As to content, the natural is determined by the form of preserved life itself as it embraces the whole human race.⁶⁴

⁶² DBWE 6, 55.

⁶³ DBWE 6, 171.

⁶⁴ DBWE 6, 174.

Bonhoeffer does not give further clarity to what he means an ‘orientation toward Christ,’ but he seems to have a kind of teleological model in mind. Those aspects of the world which appear to be moving towards or making room for the work of God, those features of the world which in some manner presently reflect their eschatological selves, those are the places where our work can participate in God’s.

Bonhoeffer also considers the notion of God’s commandment revealed “where there are divine mandates which are grounded in the revelation of Christ.”⁶⁵ Bonhoeffer defines these mandates in the following way:

By ‘mandate’ we understand the concrete divine commission grounded in the revelation of Christ and the testimony of scripture; it is the authorization and legitimization to declare a particular divine commandment, the conferring of divine authority on an earthly institution. A mandate is to be understood simultaneously as the laying claim to, commandeering of, and formation of a certain earthly domain by the divine command. The bearer of the mandate acts as a vicarious representative, as a stand-in for the one who issued the commission.⁶⁶

Bonhoeffer’s mandates are thus found in the capacity granted to some divine representatives to proclaim God’s intention within certain limits. One of these limits is that various ‘commissioners’ must respect one another, heeding the call emerging from other spheres life. Only in being “*Miteinander, Füreinander, und Gegeneinander*,”⁶⁷ can the various mandates maintain the necessary balance in which their divine message can be heard.

In both of these examples, Bonhoeffer is experimenting in *Ethik* with adapting aspects of Catholic natural law as well as the Lutheran two kingdoms tradition to the demands of his own moment. Perhaps God’s divine intention can be understood teleologically, in virtue of its orientation towards eschatological reconciliation. Or perhaps Christ’s work is made available through divinely appointed structures, instituted by God for the preservation of human life, able to fulfill their function when their responsibilities are held in balance.

⁶⁵ *DBWE* 6, 388.

⁶⁶ *DBWE* 6, 389.

⁶⁷ *DBW* 6, 397.

Underlying these tentative gestures at solutions, however, there is a recurring impulse in *Ethik* in which the approach of the God-human serves to undermine again and again the self-satisfaction of anyone confident that they have isolated a method for determining God's will. In the only section of *Ethik* in which we have a more refined second draft, a portion called "History and Good," Bonhoeffer focuses more intensively on the practical question of Christian decision-making.

Rather than appealing to an analogical or even a properly dialectical metaphysics to guide his reflection, Bonhoeffer's language here takes on an almost Heideggerian tone:

The question about the good is asked and decided in the midst of a situation of our life that is both determined in a particular way and yet still incomplete, unique and yet already in transition; it happens in the midst of our living bonds to people, things, institutions, and powers, that is, in the midst of our historical existence.⁶⁸

The ethical question for the Christian is thus not about discerning the work of Christ in the abstract, but about how we will venture to make our way from our present state of imperfect knowledge and deep existential dependency into participation in Christ. This is an entirely different space than where "ethical thought" normally operates, which—even in its religious forms—"is still largely dominated by the abstract notion of an isolated individual who, wielding an absolute criterion of what is good in and of itself, chooses continually and exclusively between this clearly recognized good and an evil recognized with equal clarity."⁶⁹ In this level of abstraction, ethical theory fails to engage actual ethical decisions, it "misses the genuine decision in which the whole person, with both understanding and will, seeks and finds what is good only in the very risk of the action itself, within the ambiguity of a historical situation."⁷⁰

The Christian life, however, finds its origin in Jesus' own claim in John 14:6 to be the life. In saying this, Jesus is not only declaring solidarity with lived existence, but expressing that one will find him only by engaging in the deepest particulars of lived existence. Consequently,

⁶⁸ *DBWE* 6, 247.

⁶⁹ *DBWE* 6, 247.

⁷⁰ *DBWE* 6, 248.

Jesus “declares every attempt to formulate the essence of life in itself as futile and doomed from the start.”⁷¹ There is no mere life ‘in itself,’ understood objectively, on its own terms. There is only life which bears some relation to Jesus, either as conformity or divergence. As a result, Jesus’ claim to be the life stands opposed to our claims to understand even our own life—“it is a claim that encounters us from outside, which we either believe or contradict.”⁷²

The Christian aspires to a life determined only by the will of God. The Christian life is thus characterized by *Verantwortung*—“responsibility,”⁷³ although with emphasis on the *Antwort* or, we could say, with emphasis on the ‘response’ in ‘responsibility.’ This emphasis highlights that true responsibility is accountable not to “considerations of usefulness” or “reference to certain principles,” but is an attempt to respond to “the reality that is given to us in Jesus Christ.”⁷⁴ Thus, the essence of a Christian life of responsibility is that, by one’s word and deed, one “give[s] an account and thus take[s] responsibility for what has happened through Jesus Christ.”⁷⁵ The hope is to manifest in one’s life the image of Jesus of Nazareth, in the hope that venturing to take up this task will also place one in the vicinity of the present work of the living God. To manifest in one’s life the image of Jesus requires an attachment to Jesus himself; it requires not merely a list of good deeds, but the intent and desire to proclaim in action the lordship of Christ.

Saying this, however, still does not bring us quite as close to the fine-grained particularity in which life’s decisions are made. Increasingly, however, Bonhoeffer is less concerned with this problem than willing to see it as necessary. It is not only the mere fact of Christ’s transcendent approach which undermines our confidence, however. It is the very nature of the life to which we are called. Even to the extent that one participates in Christ’s activity, there remains confusion:

this new life, which is *one* in Jesus Christ, is held between the Yes and the No so that in each Yes already the No is perceived, and in each No also the Yes. Both the flourishing of life's strength and self-denial, growth and death, health

⁷¹ *DBWE* 6, 249.

⁷² *DBWE* 6, 250.

⁷³ *DBWE* 6, 254.

⁷⁴ *DBWE* 6, 254.

⁷⁵ *DBWE* 6, 255.

and suffering, happiness and renunciation, achievement and humility, honor and self-deprecation belong inextricably together in a living unity full of unresolved contradictions.⁷⁶

In the midst of these unresolved questions, the Christian life is lived in a Lutheran duality of freedom and servanthood. “The structure of responsible life,” Bonhoeffer writes, “is determined in a twofold manner, namely, by life's bond to human beings and to God, and by the freedom of one's own life.”⁷⁷ The Christian acting in responsibility acts freely, “without the support of people, conditions, or principles, but nevertheless considering all existing circumstances related to people, general conditions, or principles.”⁷⁸

Thus, the responsible Christian is acting out of an internal sense of the best course of action. For the Christian, this internal sense ought to be submissive to Christ, it ought to be internal only to the extent that Christ “has become the unifying center of my existence.”⁷⁹ Only then can we say that “conscience in the formal sense still remains the call, coming from my true self, into unity with myself.”⁸⁰ The individual should only expect their conscience to serve as call to extent that are actively living “in community with Jesus Christ.”⁸¹

Bonhoeffer is well aware of what this implies, that there is grave danger in merely re-sanctifying the subjective self. At the same time, he sees no other way to speak about responsibility except as the free decision. But he tempers this freedom with the reminder both that knowledge of the situation is always imperfect, and by asserting that the one general statement which can be made about Christian responsibility is that it will never be self-seeking—“responsibility is possible only in completely devoting one's own life to another person.”⁸² Somewhere here, then, when the Christian takes seriously that they cannot properly act as God because they cannot act with the fullness of knowledge, yet they seek the good for others at cost to themselves, there lies the hope of participation. Because of what remains unknown, this participation is only a hope, but it grows into a confidence if one takes seriously the sovereignty of God, the capacity of God to graciously make use of human effort for divine ends:

⁷⁶ *DBWE 6*, 252, emphasis in original.

⁷⁷ *DBWE 6*, 257.

⁷⁸ *DBWE 6*, 283.

⁷⁹ *DBWE 6*, 278.

⁸⁰ *DBWE 6*, 278.

⁸¹ *DBWE 6*, 278.

⁸² *DBWE 6*, 259.

Thus a profound mystery of history as such is disclosed to us. Precisely those who act in the freedom of their very own responsibility see their activity as flowing into God's guidance. Free action recognizes itself ultimately as being God's action, decision as God's guidance, the venture as divine necessity. In freely surrendering the knowledge of our own goodness, the good of God occurs. Only in this ultimate perspective can we speak about good in historical action.⁸³

Only from eschatological vantage, from the perspective of the ultimate, would we be able to look back and affirm—with anything approaching certainty—that a particular action conforms to the work of Christ. In the meantime, however, this can be the Christian's only ethical endeavor, the only notion worth investigating, the “*Begriff des Wirklichkeitsgemäßen*”⁸⁴—whether or not one's action is in accordance with reality. And this question is tempered at all times with the reminder “that reality is first and last not something impersonal, but the Real One, namely, the God who became human.”⁸⁵

4.5.2 Observations

In the previous section, we considered the christological ontology which undergirds Bonhoeffer's understanding of the Christian life. This section serves as an extension of that insight by adding a new component—that because the particularity of human life is united to God's life in the person of Christ, discipleship thus entails a participation in Christ's life. This participation is also a coordination with the whole of God's kingdom, which is also to say, the whole of reality as it stands in its true form, under the will and intention of God. This kingdom is not merely an eschatological vision, it is present, and it is as active as life itself, precisely because it is the movement of Christ's own life. Frits de Lange has written at length about this participatory side of Bonhoeffer's *Ethik*:

Participation in the reality of God, as Bonhoeffer conceived it, seems to be synonymous with what St. Paul called ‘living in Christ.’ . . . To Bonhoeffer, to have faith in God is to get involved in his incarnation, to share in the life of

⁸³ *DBWE* 6, 284-5.

⁸⁴ *DBW* 6, 260.

⁸⁵ *DBWE* 6, 262.

Christ, to take part in his suffering in the world. Both in his *Ethics* and in his letters and papers from prison, Bonhoeffer develops a centripetal, worldly oriented spirituality. The dynamic of God is one that stretches from the inside outwards, from the self toward others, from inwardness to outward concreteness. Faith means the dynamic sharing of this movement.⁸⁶

Bonhoeffer thus offers a distinctly Protestant kind of *sensus fidelium* as precursor to the church's growing and deepening insight into the nature of God, one built around a notion of faith that is less "holding for true (*assensus*)" than "an act of *fiducia*: an existential trust in, a total surrender to, this reality."⁸⁷

While the *Ethik* manuscripts introduce us to the idea of participation, they also mark Bonhoeffer's reservations about our ability to identify with certainty the nature of this participation at a given moment. While Bonhoeffer considers various theological attempts to establish a rubric for discerning such faithful, obedient, participation, he returns again and again to the particular transcendence that is *Christus praesens*. This living God is transcendent not only by being ontologically other, or by being fundamentally mysterious and unknowable, but because participation in Christ necessitates the movement through unknowing in order to be real participation. Life after Christ takes on the same movement through crucifixion and resurrection, through the experience of abandonment and fulfillment which Christ experienced. It is the faithfulness in this movement which constitutes the imitation, and this faithfulness necessitates both moments of certainty and uncertainty.

While we have been slowly building an account of Bonhoeffer's christological insights, we have yet to fully come to his account of discipleship and its implications for a kind of participatory knowledge. The next two sections will thus consider the development of Bonhoeffer's thoughts over the 1930's around the question of discerning and proclaiming the will of God. In this development, we see again Bonhoeffer's interest in what difference, concretely, the Christian life makes for theological thought, though this time with the question of discipleship firmly in mind.

⁸⁶ Frits de Lange, "Against Escapism: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Contribution to Public Theology," in *Christian in Public: Aims, Methodologies and Issues in Public Theology*, ed. Len Hansen (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2007): 141-152, on 145-6

⁸⁷ De Lange, "Against Escapism," 145.

4.6 Proclamation in the Name of God: 1931-1937

4.6.1 Data from the primary sources

This section will trace a particularly prominent theme in Bonhoeffer's thought over the course of the 1930's, and its provisional resolution in the practices of discipleship. Bonhoeffer, as both pastor and theologian, sought to determine the appropriate response which the church ought to make to the rising power of Nazism. Much of his thought from 1931-1937 was consumed by— as he put it in a 1932 letter to his friend, Erwin Sutz—“the question of whether it is possible for the concrete commandment to be proclaimed throughout the church.”⁸⁸ Did the church have both a right and a responsibility to declare God's attitude towards the state of affairs in Europe and, if so, how would it determine God's will?

One avenue along which Bonhoeffer ventured in search of an answer was his deep involvement in international ecumenical movements. The nature of the church universal, surpassing the particular identities of individual national or confessional churches, was both an interesting theological problematic for Bonhoeffer and a potential practical solution to his desire for the church to speak on world affairs. In a 1932 lecture at a youth conference in Czechoslovakia, Bonhoeffer reminded the participants that “the church as the one church-community of the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the Lord of the world, has the task of speaking his word to the entire world.”⁸⁹ This could only be possible should the church speak “in the authority of the Christ who is present and living in it.”⁹⁰ While Bonhoeffer thus hoped for a bold statement from individual churches, the warrant for declaring a particular statement as God's comes with a caveat. Only the church faithful to God could speak on God's behalf, and so the church must, if necessary, carry out “a protest against every form of church that does not honor the question of the truth above all.”⁹¹ If the church could not look at its own conduct and be assured of its faithful intentions, then perhaps “qualified silence would perhaps be more appropriate for the church today.”⁹²

This question about the conditions of the church's faithfulness which could justify proclamation only became more pronounced after Hitler's ascent to power in 1933. Given the rhetoric

⁸⁸ *DBWE 11*, 136.

⁸⁹ *DBWE 11*, 358.

⁹⁰ *DBWE 11*, 359.

⁹¹ *DBWE 11*, 358.

⁹² *DBWE 11*, 358.

emerging from the chancellory, the possibility of war already appeared on the horizon. Bonhoeffer—as he put it in a 1933 ecumenical conference in Denmark—still hoped that “one great Ecumenical Council of the Holy Church of Christ” might soon have “taken the weapons from the hands of their sons, forbidden war, and proclaimed the peace of Christ against the raging world.”⁹³ An objective, concrete knowledge of God’s present will could emerge, in Bonhoeffer’s mind, but only from a church completely dedicated to Christ.

In a sense, then, what the *Bekennende Kirche* proclaimed at Barmen and Dahlem in 1934 was an answer to Bonhoeffer’s hopes. He became known as one of the most ardent advocates for fidelity to the confessing statements, even famously arguing in a 1936 article that “whoever knowingly separates himself from the Confessing Church in Germany separates himself from salvation.”⁹⁴ Yet the question of how exactly—even within a church confessing itself as faithful—one might pursue faithfulness to God in a way that would yield knowledge of divine intent still haunted Bonhoeffer.

In the autumn of 1933, Bonhoeffer left his academic work in Berlin to take up a pastorate at a German church in London. Over the course of 1934, he visited a number of Quaker, Mennonite, and contemplative communities across the north of England. He began to express to friends and acquaintances—in the recollection of the Hutterite leader Hardy Arnold—a desire “to found a sort of Protestant monastic community, with confessions, spiritual exercises, remaining unmarried as far as possible.”⁹⁵ This community Bonhoeffer imagined was to be an “attempt to begin to follow Jesus’ words as a rule,” thus hoping “to come nearer to the essential core of the truth of Christ, by being open right from the start about not yet knowing the will of God for our time.”⁹⁶ Perhaps in the course of a communal pursuit of spiritual disciplines, one might find the grounds of faithfulness necessary to speak on God’s behalf.

This experiment was realized in 1935 when Bonhoeffer returned to Germany as the director of a confessing preachers’ seminary at Finkenwalde. There, Bonhoeffer instituted a structured

⁹³ *DBWE 13*, 309.

⁹⁴ *DBWE 14*, 675.

⁹⁵ *DBWE 13*, 161.

⁹⁶ *DBWE 13*, 162.

communal life for the students which revolved around worship, prayer and meditation on scripture.⁹⁷ In so doing, Bonhoeffer's hope was the structure of their life together would offer answers to the question, "How can I live a Christian life in this concrete world, and where are the ultimate authorities for such a life that alone is worth living?"⁹⁸ The answer would be theological, but in the sense of being intensely particular, a manifestation of God's will for a particular moment, an answer "no longer . . . abstract" but instead "articulated only by actually living and reflecting together on the commandments in a concrete, objective fashion."⁹⁹ The practical consequence of this conviction was to make Finkenwalde a place of communal prayer, exegesis, learning, and discernment. In this corporate obedience to Christ, Bonhoeffer intended to establish "a group of completely free, committed pastors" able "to preach the word of God for the sake of decision and discernment of the Spirit in the present and future struggles of the church."¹⁰⁰ At the heart of Finkenwalde's practice was scriptural reflection, "I read the Bible," Bonhoeffer wrote to his brother, "I ask every passage: what is God saying to us here? And I implore God to show us what he wants to say."¹⁰¹ As a morning routine, this same question were placed before a lectionary text by each student at Finkenwalde, and was the foundation of their '*gemeinsamen Leben*.'

The insights of *Nachfolge* have to be understood in this context. Discipleship, for Bonhoeffer, meant something quite specific, a communal life of common worship, fellowship, confession and service, with prayer and meditation on scripture as background. This was as close as Bonhoeffer would ever come to describing a kind of method by which the presence of God could become known, albeit a method which was intended to involve what Derek Taylor has called "practices of un-mastery,"¹⁰²—disciplines by which one could be confronted by truth rather than assuming one's own knowledge of it. The life of discipleship was thus a praxis in which both certainty and uncertainty could have their place within faithful participation in God, a theme which would become more pronounced in the late 1930's.

⁹⁷ DBWE 14, 97.

⁹⁸ DBWE 14, 167.

⁹⁹ DBWE 14, 95.

¹⁰⁰ DBWE 14, 96.

¹⁰¹ DBWE 14, 168.

¹⁰² Derek W. Taylor, "Reading Scripture in the Wake of Christ: The Church as a Hermeneutical Space" (PhD dissertation: Duke University, 2017), 26.

4.6.2 Observations

For much of the 1930's (and, in some ways, for the entire latter half of his life) Bonhoeffer was on a restless search to discern how best to be faithful to God in the midst of a hostile and violent political climate. This quest led him into opposition to his own church and then opposition to his own government, all while trying to understand these positions theologically. In the face of a *Deutsche Christen* movement that had fashioned a God to support its own positions, Bonhoeffer was painfully aware of the temptation to theological self-deception. In pursuing the will of God, he was simultaneously pursuing a way of understanding theology that would permit God's speech at the level of greatest particularity while preventing sinful humans from abusing the privilege of speaking on God's behalf.

It is no coincidence that Bonhoeffer's growing opposition to his own church in their accommodation of Nazi rule coincided with an intense focus on the nature of obedience. His task was not only to be obedient, but to help his church into obedience, and to give that church the resources necessary to speak about obedience to God to the broader world. His determination to pursue the will of God revealed in Christ led him along a path to Finkenwalde, to the conviction that the church could "only achieve true inner clarity and honesty by really starting to take the Sermon on the Mount seriously."¹⁰³ Preliminarily then, it is worth noting that Bonhoeffer's interest in discipleship began as an interest in discerning the grounds of faithfulness upon which God's will could be known. Discipleship, at this early stage, took a semi-contemplative, reflective form—Bonhoeffer asking his students to live together, work together, play together, all while praying, reading, serving, and discerning together. Throughout the 1930's Bonhoeffer's work was conditioned by the belief that "Jesus is living, living here in our midst. Look for him, here or at home, call to him, ask him, beg him, and suddenly he will be there with you, and you will know that he lives."¹⁰⁴

For the theologian attempting to establish a universal and indubitable basis for accessing divine truth, there is good reason to question the revelatory immediacy of such practices. But Bonhoeffer approached them as one neither jaded nor naively credulous, aware of the temptation "to seek universal, eternal truths that might correspond to our own 'eternal' nature and that

¹⁰³ *DBWE 13*, 284.

¹⁰⁴ *DBWE 13*, 375.

might be demonstrable as such.”¹⁰⁵ In saying this, Bonhoeffer inverts the theologian’s presumption. It is not the kneeling disciple who is at risk of hearing her own desires and calling them God’s will. The disciple, in kneeling, at least grasps the limitations of her understanding. It is the scholar, applying to every notion a supposedly objective standard of universal validity, who is most at risk of enshrining personal beliefs as immutable laws.

We have two features of Bonhoeffer’s thought to this point which are relevant to this thesis’ larger project. First, we find in Bonhoeffer a more positive aspect to the notion of divine presence than the totality of negation in which Kierkegaard often speaks. This is not to separate the two thinkers, but to suggest that Bonhoeffer’s confidence in *Christus praesens* provides an even more concrete notion of divine approach than Kierkegaard’s universal-particular. Second, however, Bonhoeffer is well aware of how easily ideology creeps back into the most well-intentioned attempts to speak about the will of God. And so, while discipleship appears to offer a grounds for understanding God, Bonhoeffer intends to define discipleship in such a way that, within the notion itself, there is an understanding of God’s perpetually surprising, convicting, directing speech. It is this more particular kind of Bonhoefferian dialectic—the singular movement of the disciple through both knowing and unknowing—which we will continue to explore in the next section.

4.7 The Participation of Unknowing: 1938-1941

4.7.1 Data from the primary sources

In late 1937, the Gestapo shut down the seminary at Finkenwalde, and while Bonhoeffer continued to lecture for a time underground, his teaching career was rapidly—and involuntarily—coming to a close. His newest, most pressing concern was to avoid being drafted into the German military as it began preparing for war. Bonhoeffer escaped briefly to America in mid-1939 before—under the strain of great conviction—choosing to return to Germany to see out the looming war with his family, friends, and students.

Bonhoeffer had spent much of the 1930’s debating what the church should say to the state about the possibility of war. Once war began, however, he was no less interested in what the church—and the faithful disciple—ought to do. His theological development gave him some

¹⁰⁵ *DBWE 14*, 168.

reason to hope that God's revelatory presence might reveal some insight. He continued wrestling with the practical implications of this claim in an extended meditation on Psalm 119 that he wrote over late 1939 and early 1940. Bonhoeffer's biographer, Eberhard Bethge, later recounted Bonhoeffer describing this meditation as "the climax of his theological life."¹⁰⁶ The imagery of Psalm 119 which occupies Bonhoeffer's attention is much like the imagery of Kierkegaard's *Upbuilding Discourses*. There is a path set before the disciple which must be traversed. This path follows the course of Christ's life, it is set by Christ and must be followed, we might say, in imitation of him. A key difference between Kierkegaard and Bonhoeffer emerges immediately, however. For Kierkegaard, the path itself draws the disciple's attention precisely because the one who cut the path is no longer visible. For Bonhoeffer, as we shall see, the one who cut the path is much more fully present, if not visible, per se. The traces of Christ moving ahead are fresher, the evidences of activity more apparent. And that is because, in a real sense for Bonhoeffer, Christ *is* ahead, actively cutting the trail that we must walk. As a result—and here the metaphor begins to break down—it is not only Christ who is alive and walking ahead, it is the trail itself which is alive, in a sense, bending and reshaping to conform to the will of the living Christ.

Bonhoeffer's meditation begins with his own version of the chastening of common rationality. For those who find themselves pursuing God, there must be an admission that "God has converted me to himself once and for all" and thus that "God has set the beginning."¹⁰⁷ The disciple finds herself living and, as a disciple, finds that her path has been leading towards God even before she became aware of it. Whatever might have launched this journey is now, from the middle, inaccessible. Any pretension to speak about the logic of initiating this journey—or about the origins of God's intention which preceded the calling of God's people onto the path—is mere thought experiment. Furthermore, as thought experiment, it is subject to all the whims and errors of idolatry. Only the concretion of Christ, the Way, deserves the disciple's focus. Thus, in Bonhoeffer's words, "there is only one danger on this path, namely, to want to step back behind this beginning or to lose sight of the goal, which is the same thing."¹⁰⁸ In attempting to extract a principle from the course of the Way, to map out either its source or terminus, "the path ceases to be a path of grace and of faith. It ceases to be God's own path."¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ *DBWE 15*, 496.

¹⁰⁷ *DBWE 15*, 497.

¹⁰⁸ *DBWE 15*, 497.

¹⁰⁹ *DBWE 15*, 497.

In fidelity to the psalmist, Bonhoeffer at first describes “a path being walked within God’s laws.”¹¹⁰ But this requires clarification: “The question about the law of God is answered not by a moral doctrine, a norm,” as we might typically assume, “but by a historical event, not by an unfulfilled ideal but by an act completed by God.”¹¹¹ The fullness of God’s action in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ is the true origin of all redemptive events, and thus “whoever asks about the law will be reminded of Jesus Christ.”¹¹² The revelation of God in Christ changes the terms on which we talk about something like a path or a way. It is no longer mere dictate, but “God’s ways are the ways that he has tread before and that we are to walk with him now.”¹¹³ It is the Father himself, revealed in Christ, whom we pursue with the aid of the Spirit. It is God who is moving right now, and we are to follow—“either one moves ahead or one is not with God.”¹¹⁴ It is only in this following that “it becomes clear that the gospel and faith are not a timeless idea but an action of God and of the human being in history.”¹¹⁵

The life of the disciple is one of total dependence on God’s self-revealing present. This puts the disciple in a strange relationship to knowledge, hopeful for some more positive affirmation of God’s will than the Kierkegaardian dialectic would suggest, yet equally affirming that this knowledge will not extend far. It is a grace that only leads us “*von Schritt zu Schritt*,”¹¹⁶ which is also to say, “*von Erkenntnis zu Erkenntnis*,”¹¹⁷ an entry into the task of the moment which leads to a knowledge that is, again, only of God’s will for the moment. Bonhoeffer’s preferred metaphor is the biblical imagery of blind men entering the way of Christ, be it Bartimaeus or, perhaps more pointedly, the blind man at Bethsaida whose healing is itself a gradual unfolding.¹¹⁸ The illumination of knowing is not the point of following. Obedience is its own point. Knowledge is nearly superfluous. Even the knowledge of God’s will is not a given for the disciple, who “tremble[s] with each word . . . from God’s mouth and in anticipation of the next word and the continuation of grace.”¹¹⁹ The disciple trembles not only in awe, but “*mit tiefer*

¹¹⁰ *DBWE 15*, 497.

¹¹¹ *DBWE 15*, 499.

¹¹² *DBWE 15*, 499.

¹¹³ *DBWE 15*, 504.

¹¹⁴ *DBWE 15*, 504.

¹¹⁵ *DBWE 15*, 504.

¹¹⁶ *DBW 15*, 516.

¹¹⁷ *DBW 15*, 528.

¹¹⁸ *DBWE 15*, 520.

¹¹⁹ *DBWE 15*, 523.

*Angst*¹²⁰ because the knowledge of God's will is so essential and yet so temporary. "What if God willed one day to hide his commandments from me?"¹²¹ The disciple lives with this question and the possibility it contains of a "severe trial" should "we no longer recognize from God's word what we are to do."¹²² Blinded anew, the disciple can only turn back to look at the way made visible in Christ's earthly life, "by what God did for me when he acted on his people and in Jesus Christ, by what God's deeds in becoming human, the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ as divine actions mean for me."¹²³ This intensive focus on the example of Christ may not lead to knowledge, but it will serve as a reminder that Christ's path to glory included its own trial of unknowing. "In the daily remembering of Christ . . . I am promised that God has loved me from eternity and has not forgotten me."¹²⁴

As the 1930's had progressed, the growing oppression of the Nazi regime was met by an ever more tepid response from even the congregations which had clung to the earlier declarations. As weighty as Barmen and Dahlem were, they were written in 1934, speaking to an ecclesial moment that would have seemed almost cheerfully naive from the vantage of 1939's darkness. In a lecture delivered in October, 1938, Bonhoeffer raised the concerns of the earlier declarations all over again, suggesting that their limitations were their strengths. Yes, they did not anticipate the fullness of Nazi perfidy, but they did not intend to do so, "Dahlem was able to leave the worry for the future up to God because it wanted to be obedient to him alone."¹²⁵ By implication, what was required in 1938 was not literalist adherence to the declarations, per se, but an equal measure of discernment about God's will, a fresh obedience and a new proclamation, though whether this new witness would be word or deed or both remained unclear. But Bonhoeffer retained his expectation that, "we will become free of worry only when we abide firmly in the truth that we know and let ourselves be guided by it alone."¹²⁶ God's present command for the church could be known, could even be joined as the church participated in God's own activity.

¹²⁰ *DBW 15*, 531.

¹²¹ *DBWE 15*, 523.

¹²² *DBWE 15*, 523.

¹²³ *DBWE 15*, 518.

¹²⁴ *DBWE 15*, 519.

¹²⁵ *DBWE 15*, 434.

¹²⁶ *DBWE 15*, 434.

At the same time, Bonhoeffer remained aware that clear answers might not avail themselves as readily as he hoped. A 1938 seminar series he delivered on the topic of temptation indicated this growing apprehension. Reflecting on the implications of ‘lead us not into temptation,’ Bonhoeffer argues that we misunderstand temptation if we presume it to be “the testing of one’s own strength . . . against opposition.”¹²⁷ Instead, temptation is the complete absence of strength, abandonment, having all one’s supposed powers turned against oneself. “This,” Bonhoeffer writes, “is the decisive fact in the temptation of a Christian, namely, that one is being *forsaken*, forsaken by all his strengths, indeed attacked by them, forsaken by all human beings, forsaken by God himself.”¹²⁸ So deep is the abandonment that the decisions made in the time of tempting “may prove *irrevocable [unwiderruflich]*.”¹²⁹ Precisely for this reason, the Christian does not seek temptation in order to prove her strength, but asks to be protected from temptation. Yet times of abandonment may come for the disciple. We know this because such times came for Christ. Jesus also knew temptation in divine abandonment, and yet was without sin. In a sense, Bonhoeffer argues, Scripture gives us “*nur zwei Versuchungsgeschichten*,”—Adam and Eve in the garden and Jesus in the wilderness.¹³⁰ Our present relatedness to temptation thus depends on where we fall in relation to these two types—“We are either tempted *in Adam*, or we are tempted *in Christ*.”¹³¹ For the disciple of Christ, our own temptation is thus participatory. It is not ours alone, it is properly an extension of Christ’s own temptation, and so “to participate in the temptation of *Christ* . . . means at the same time to participate in the overcoming and the victories of Christ.”¹³²

Bonhoeffer soon had opportunity to test these insights over 1939 and 1940, however, as war began and he appeared to experience the nadir of his own trial of unknowing. As he later reflected to his fellow conspirators, uncertainty over the correct course of action felt nearly epochal. Never before had a people “had so little ground under their feet;” no temptation could have been more impenetrable than that, in which “every possible alternative . . . appeared equally unbearable.”¹³³ Through this time, however, Bonhoeffer remained convinced of God’s present activity—a conviction that has rarely seemed less apparent than it would have for a

¹²⁷ *DBWE 15*, 387.

¹²⁸ *DBWE 15*, 387, emphasis in original.

¹²⁹ *DBWE 15*, 388, emphasis in original.

¹³⁰ *DBW 15*, 376.

¹³¹ *DBWE 15*, 390.

¹³² *DBWE 15*, 396.

¹³³ *DBWE 8*, 38.

German at the turn of 1940. In a meditation written for Easter of that year, Bonhoeffer insists that “faith receives the certainty of the resurrection solely from the present witness of Christ.”¹³⁴ At the heart of the Christian life is the acknowledgement that “the Risen One reveals himself as the Living One,”¹³⁵ and in that transition the resurrection passes from mere article of faith in the possibility of redemption into a genuine, untamable force.

The pivot that Bonhoeffer’s thinking undergoes circa 1940 is over the question of whether or not knowledge of God’s present activity necessarily precedes obedience. Nowhere is this more evident than in a short meditation on the Gospel of John—one of the last pieces of writing published by Bonhoeffer before being entirely censored by the authorities in September, 1940. In a passage commenting on John 20, Bonhoeffer considers the example of Thomas. One senses the anxieties of the moment in the idea Bonhoeffer inserts into Thomas’ mind: “What good to me is the news of the most glorious miracle if I cannot experience and examine it myself? Dead is dead, and a wish makes people gullible.”¹³⁶ Why hope that God is at work without evidence? And why act without a clear, reasoned articulation of the best course? Intentionally or not, Thomas serves as a kind of alter-ego for Bonhoeffer, equally “a disciple ready for any sacrifice, who openly acknowledged his questions for Jesus and desired clear answers.”¹³⁷ In a sense, in Bonhoeffer’s reading, Thomas is in the right, for he should either be seized by the fervour of faith—even risking the accusation of a “*krankte Schwärmerei*”—or else admit that he does not believe at all.¹³⁸ In another sense, however, Thomas is in the wrong, presumptuously implying that faith is only owed to God if one’s own standard of belief has been met. Here, Bonhoeffer’s exegesis picks up on a peculiar silence in the biblical text in order to invert our assumptions about its meaning. Superficially, Thomas’ story does not appear to be the kind of rebuke to empirical knowledge which Bonhoeffer takes it to be. Indeed, it is commonly read as the opposite, as Jesus freely and graciously granting Thomas the evidence he demands. While Jesus does tell Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands,”¹³⁹ the text does not tell us whether or in what way Thomas avails himself of this offer. Instead, Bonhoeffer places the weight of Jesus’ short address on the last phrase, “*me ginou apistos alla pistos*”—do not be unbelieving, but believe.

¹³⁴ *DBWE 16*, 476.

¹³⁵ *DBWE 16*, 475.

¹³⁶ *DBWE 15*, 545.

¹³⁷ *DBWE 15*, 545.

¹³⁸ *DBW 15*, 557.

¹³⁹ John 20:27

Much hangs in the balance, according to Bonhoeffer, in this moment after Jesus' address but before Thomas has made any response, before Thomas has even reached for the proffered hands and side—"the final decision has not been made yet but is dangerously close."¹⁴⁰ And instead of moving in for a closer examination, and thus having his thirst for understanding satisfied, "the Easter faith breaks through in Thomas"¹⁴¹ and he unhesitatingly makes that foundational Christian confession, "my Lord and my God."¹⁴² Thus, in Bonhoeffer's reading, "Jesus's answer does not glorify doubt, seeing, or touching, but glorifies faith alone" which "rest[s] on not that which we see but the word of God alone."¹⁴³ Bonhoeffer's conclusion, for the disciple, is that obedience precedes even understanding, that the disciples act in fidelity to God even before God's work is unveiled to the sensible eye. The disciples "could ground their lives only in him, based not on how they saw him but on how they believed in him as the Christ."¹⁴⁴ Even the first disciples, standing in the room with the risen Christ, were no less exposed to doubt than us, had they relied only on their senses. Even for them, it was "only when they themselves believed Him" that he became "the Lord for them."¹⁴⁵ For others, the "millions of doubters"¹⁴⁶ who would follow after Thomas, "their doubt will be overcome not through seeing or touching but through the witness of the living Christ."¹⁴⁷

This pivot opens a new possibility in Bonhoeffer's thinking, that the demand for knowledge of the best course of action is itself a kind of self-idolatry. Perhaps we pursue such knowledge not because we are determined to follow God, but because we are determined to justify ourselves. Of course, in action, the disciple must be operating from some sense of where obedience to Christ leads, even if the present activity of God is obscure. Bonhoeffer continued to wrestle with this problem theologically even as the practical circumstances of his life lead him deeper into organized opposition against Hitler. Two guideposts marked the shape of his thinking, both of them evident in a 1941 paper written on the Lutheran notion of the first use of the law for the purposes of civil government restraining evildoing. The *primus usus* was a doctrine to

¹⁴⁰ *DBWE 15*, 546.

¹⁴¹ *DBWE 15*, 546.

¹⁴² John 20:28

¹⁴³ *DBWE 15*, 546.

¹⁴⁴ *DBWE 15*, 547.

¹⁴⁵ *DBWE 15*, 547.

¹⁴⁶ *DBWE 15*, 546.

¹⁴⁷ *DBWE 15*, 546.

be handled with a great deal of nuance at any time, but particularly during wartime, with the temptation at hand to justify violence by suggesting its use as a restraint against the evil of one's enemies. At stake, in part, was a longstanding debate within the German sphere over the relation of the gospel to civil order. The *primus usus* is a kind of authority granted to the state by the church, permitting civil authorities to make use of God's law for a 'secular' purpose in maintaining civil order, and in this sense "the one proclaiming the *primus usus legis* is primarily the church" and only "secondarily the government."¹⁴⁸ The church lends this legitimacy to the state in obedience to God's will to "preserve the world from disorder and arbitrariness."¹⁴⁹ Of course, in the face of some renegade anti-Hitler clerics proclaiming the illegitimacy of the Nazi state, the authorities might appeal to precisely this restraining function to justify persecution. Resistance necessarily entails a kind of disorder, oppression a kind of order. But Bonhoeffer is well aware that order is no Christian end unto itself, the church "has no *independent* interest in the establishment of a certain civic order."¹⁵⁰ Order is only properly order when it finds its origin in God, and so the gospel must be proclaimed, and when the gospel is heard and believed, "justice, peace, order should and can be present."¹⁵¹ Thus, God does not seek order for its own sake—"not just because the gospel is present but in order that it may be present."¹⁵²

This serves as the first guidepost marking Bonhoeffer's thought, that the disciple ought to be actively pursuing the circumstances in which the Christian proclamation can be heard and understood. This entails the pursuit of a Christian order, to be sharply distinguished from an un-Christian order. For the church to stand on the side of order for order's sake undermines the very premise of the *primus usus*. How can God's Word be heard and understood if its witnesses do not order their entire existence towards the very love, joy, and peace to which they attest? The implications of such a question are broad and open to interpretation, and Bonhoeffer notes "the silence within the confessional writings" with respect to further detail.¹⁵³ Nonetheless, there is a certain intuitiveness to the idea that disciples would pursue civic peace, for example, in order to lend a kind of cultural intelligibility to the simultaneous proclamation of gospel peace with God. At any rate, for Bonhoeffer, the latitude permitted by the confessions to work out the particulars is the point—it "gives proclaimers who face these questions freedom for a

¹⁴⁸ *DBWE 16*, 593.

¹⁴⁹ *DBWE 16*, 594.

¹⁵⁰ *DBWE 16*, 596.

¹⁵¹ *DBWE 16*, 596.

¹⁵² *DBWE 16*, 596.

¹⁵³ *DBWE 16*, 598.

concrete, responsible decision to the extent that their awareness of the subject . . . is grounded in faith.”¹⁵⁴

The second guidepost in the essay on the *primus usus* presses a little further towards clarity. Should disciples have trouble distinguishing between whether they are working towards Christian order or towards an un-Christian order that merely benefits them, they must ask where they stand in respect to human suffering. If they are not demonstrably suffering themselves, then there will always be room to question their own motives. But the more that they find real loss accruing to them even as they are pursuing Christ, even to the point of persecution by civil authorities—what Bonhoeffer calls a “Revelation 13 situation”¹⁵⁵—the more clearly they will know themselves to be working alongside the purposes of the suffering Christ. “The worldly responsibility laid on them,” Bonhoeffer asserts, “will prove valid by obedient suffering and earnest discipline in the congregation.”¹⁵⁶

Neither of these guideposts can or should be understood as foolproof methodologies for discerning the will of God. Nor does Bonhoeffer intend them to be so. But for a time of temptation, with ‘so little ground’ under one’s feet, they serve as a manifesto for continuing to abide in the word, striving hopefully to participate in God’s own Word.

4.7.2 *Observations*

As Bonhoeffer’s thoughts grow deeper and more sophisticated, he retains the sense that discipleship serves as a ground for knowledge. But his understanding of discipleship takes on more nuance. He does not entirely abandon the possibility that—in the midst of faithful living—God’s will could be disclosed to the Christian. But this claim must be held delicately, within the far deeper understanding that God’s activity is the principal plot of creation’s redemption. Whether one’s own activity participates in God’s is not necessarily known or knowable, at least by our standards, and one should pray and confess accordingly. Bonhoeffer later wrote, in his fragmentary essay on truth-telling, about the insidious, idolatrous way in which the one who speaks a Christian language can still justify the most outrageously un-Christian behaviour:

¹⁵⁴ *DBWE* 16, 599.

¹⁵⁵ *DBWE* 16, 597.

¹⁵⁶ *DBWE* 16, 597.

By putting a halo on his own head for being a zealot for the truth who can take no account of human weaknesses, he destroys the living truth between persons. He violates shame, desecrates the mystery, breaks trust, betrays the community in which he lives, and smiles arrogantly over the havoc he has wrought and over the human weakness that "can't bear the truth." He says that the truth is destructive and demands its victims, and he feels like a god over the feeble creatures and does not realize that he is serving Satan.¹⁵⁷

There are no conceptual guideposts to render the disciple infallible. There is only the responsibility of the disciple to answer to God's judgment, and this only with the awareness of grace, knowing full well that God will not abide by the conceptual markers we have used to define our own behaviour as righteous. And thus, setting aside such labels, we are left with the question of "how I bring into effect in my concrete life, with its manifold relationships, the truthful speech I owe to God."¹⁵⁸ While this may not equip the kind of confident moralizing congregations often expect from the pulpit, it is the only speech the disciple has to offer. It is not clear, but risky, and "yet the dangers inherent in the concept of living truth must never cause a person to forsake this concept in favor of the formal, cynical conception of truth."¹⁵⁹

Discipleship thus stretches beyond the boundaries of mere assent to confessional dogma, and beyond even the boundaries of contemplative disciplines. Both of these aspects are not so much neglected or rejected as they are swept up into the even larger category of following after Christ. The Christian confesses, but only because Christ confesses; prays, but only because Christ is praying; proclaims scripture, but only in its meaning relevant to Christ's proclamation. Christ is the way, and thus is present to and with the Christian on the way herself. This is the context in which all other claims about knowledge—especially theological knowledge—can be made. And this context entails, from the beginning, the reminder that the disciple's failure to understand is equally as important in the task of participation as the disciple's understanding.

¹⁵⁷ *DBWE 16*, 604.

¹⁵⁸ *DBWE 16*, 602.

¹⁵⁹ *DBWE 16*, 605.

4.8 Discussion

With Bonhoeffer's work in mind, we can finally draw more explicitly the connection between discipleship and the theological task of knowing and speaking about God. The imitation of Christ does not constitute a law, but a divinely-appointed, grace-filled venture. It encompasses both the responsibility and the freedom of the Christian—the responsibility of knowing oneself called by the God of Christ, the freedom of being permitted to pursue faithfulness in myriad and unexpected ways. This divine appointment does not require knowledge as pre-condition, but provides knowledge as an eschatological conclusion. What certainty it provides is less about the content of action than about the form of action, that one ventures to pursue Christ whole-heartedly and depends on the gracious God to make this a participation.

Bonhoeffer also provides a broader ontological account in which this notion of participation can make sense. He extends the Kierkegaardian dialectic with his firm christological conviction that God is presently active. The disciple's entire task, categorically, is to join in the present activity of God, the Spirit, the living Christ. It is only the one faithfully living under the lordship of Christ to whom Christ becomes known as Lord. Nonetheless, the lordship of Christ extends to every corner of creation, regardless of our consent or affirmation. The disciple aims to participate in the life of God, not to be recognized and lauded as participant in the life of God. Sometimes the disciple knows the will of God clearly, other times not. But even the time of abandonment finds itself caught up in Christ's own temptation, and so we cling—as did Christ in the wilderness—to the word, to the memory and necessity of proclaiming God truly. At no point, however, does the participatory nature of discipleship render to the disciple the true merit of agency. We do not act on behalf of Christ. God does the work. The disciple's righteousness is secure, not on the basis of having successfully participated in God's righteousness, but because the grace of Christ can sweep up even our misguided efforts into the activity of God. In this way, the call to obedience—both when we interpret it successfully and when we don't—yields a knowing. We are knowing when we are rightly affirming God's intention, even if what we are affirming is God's willingness to forgive us. Precisely as the true form of living, knowledge in this regard does render a portal to truth, a universal epistemic methodology, a well into which we can cast any kind of question. The knowledge that arises from discipleship is the cognitive form of obedience, and thus give us only the answers God permits to the questions which God privileges.

Bonhoeffer's development over this phase of his life provides a bridge across the superficial differences between his work in *Nachfolge* and the later *Ethik* manuscript. At all points, Bonhoeffer is concerned with the question, "What does [Jesus] want from us today?"¹⁶⁰ This question cannot be answered in the abstract, as "Jesus Christ cannot be identified either with an ideal, a norm, or with what exists."¹⁶¹ He can only be who he is as the Living One, and thus he can only be accepted or rejected, obeyed or ignored. His word "creates existence anew"¹⁶² and thus the only remaining intellectual task for the disciple is "how life is to be lived in"¹⁶³ the reality of Christ. What it meant to participate God's mission to humanity was a question that Bonhoeffer returned to again and again, writing, even as late as June, 1944, that the answer could only be found in heeding God's commands:

God gives us the commandments so that we can be and remain close to God, for God, and with God. God is revealed to be our Lord and helper by making known to us God's commandment. . . God is so great that the smallest details are not too small for God, and God is so fully the Lord that he comes close by our side as helper.¹⁶⁴

4.9 Conclusion

Within the scope of this thesis' larger argument, discipleship should not be understood as either the subordination of praxis to theory (as is classically held) nor as the subordination of theory to praxis (as the radical alternative suggests). Instead, discipleship is the point at which theology's origin in the self-disclosure of the living God is revealed as already united with the particularity of human life. Discipleship is the entry into this union, and precisely as we enter, knowledge is revealed to be less essential to faithfulness to God than theology might have previously assumed. Here we have the beginnings of an understanding of theological speech which can more effectively resist ideology by properly locating knowing as one verb among many in the activity of participating in God. No amount of case studies, thought experiments, or allegories will suffice to express the breadth of what is possible in the freedom and responsibility of the disciple's theological language. For the sake of pursuing some greater clarity,

¹⁶⁰ *DBWE* 4, 37.

¹⁶¹ *DBWE* 6, 55.

¹⁶² *DBWE* 4, 62.

¹⁶³ *DBWE* 6, 55.

¹⁶⁴ *DBWE* 16, 636.

however, the next chapter will consider a theme which one would assume to be deeply relevant to the present thesis. That theme is embodiment, and the relation of the human body to the union of theory and praxis which is discipleship will be considered in conversation with contemporary debates.

Chapter 5

The Material and the Rhetorical - A Case Study on Theologies of Embodiment After Discipleship

5.1 Introduction

The claim made in this thesis that discipleship could serve as a prolegomenon to theology suggests that we are seeking an embodied account of reasoning. The definition we have given to discipleship and its epistemic effects through the work of Pascal, Kierkegaard, and Bonhoeffer complicates this suggestion. It is true, in a specific and limited sense, that theology after discipleship is embodied. The purpose of this chapter is to clarify that specific, limited sense, while also allowing the argument of this thesis to be tested in a case study. That case study is a contemporary debate about the nature of an embodied approach to theory. The implications of discipleship which we have explored so far place the divine absolute thoroughly on the side of the particularity of bodies. But in saying this, as we shall see, it also questions whether we understand what we mean when we speak about our bodies, and thus what it means when we propose to locate theory more closely to this perceived reality.

This chapter will explore the work of two theologians, one ancient—Clement of Alexandria—and one modern—Sarah Coakley—to explore the possibilities which discipleship holds for theological language about the body. As part of this conversation, this chapter will consider how discipleship's navigation through difficult questions coincides with some elements of philosophical approaches to embodiment, while rejecting others. To begin with, then, we will try to locate what is meant by a philosophical approach to embodiment within a quick sketch of post-Hegelian thought.

5.2 Embodiment and the Legacy of Hegel

Throughout the previous chapters, much of the discussion on Kierkegaard and Bonhoeffer took place before the backdrop of a European theological landscape shaped by Hegel. As we begin to speak about embodiment and its relation to philosophy, this background will have to move to the fore. As soon as we begin to consider the question of how thought can or should be embodied, we are also taking up a question about the best way to interpret Hegel. Insofar as this thesis is attempting to speak about discipleship as a prolegomenon capable of generating a theological language outside of ideology, it is touching sides with a history of left Hegelian critique of ideology dating back to Marx.

Marx's 1846 *Die deutsche Ideologie* was a critique of other young philosophers influenced by Hegel who might well have appeared to be Marx's obvious allies, in particular Ludwig Feuerbach, Bruno Bauer, and Max Stirner. Marx describes these "Young-Hegelians"¹ as self-styled radicals who believe themselves to have achieved in the immediately preceding years "a revolution beside which the French Revolution was child's play."² Hegel's historical dialectic opened the door for young intellectuals to see themselves as catalysts of a new epoch, in part by questioning, revising, or rejecting the truths which might have seemed previously self-evident. This "universal ferment into which all the 'powers of the past' are swept" is a development which Marx welcomes, on one hand.³ He is equally eager to "liberate [humanity] from the chimeras, the ideas, dogmas, imaginary beings under the yoke of which they are pining away."⁴ And he is not opposed to the assumption—as it appears in the work of many Young Hegelians—that this liberation would also throw down the dogmas of Christian religion. His opposition to the Young Hegelians, however, is that their radicalism is "confined to criticism of religious conceptions."⁵ They speak as if radical change of a social institution can be accomplished by merely "ascribing religious conceptions to it or by declaring that it is a theological matter"⁶ such that "gradually every dominant relationship was declared to be a religious relationship and transformed into a cult, a cult of law, a cult of the state, etc."⁷

¹ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, "The German Ideology," in *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels Works, Volume 5, 1845-1847*, eds. Jack Cohen et al., trans. W. Lough (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 23.

² Marx and Engels, "German Ideology," 27.

³ Marx and Engels, "German Ideology," 27.

⁴ Marx and Engels, "German Ideology," 23.

⁵ Marx and Engels, "German Ideology," 29.

⁶ Marx and Engels, "German Ideology," 30.

⁷ Marx and Engels, "German Ideology," 29.

Inadvertently, then, while critiquing religion, the Young Hegelians ascribe to religion a breadth of scope in determining the meaning of human affairs that Marx wants to challenge. By criticizing the appearance of quasi-religious thought forms in politics, economics, and the law, the Young Hegelians are also attributing the very founding logic of human society to religion. This is problematic, for Marx, on two related fronts. First, all of this emphasis on religion obscures what he wants to propose as an even more fundamental basis of social relations, “the materialist conception of history.”⁸ Second, this critique of apparently religious modes of thought in society has convinced the Young Hegelians that revolution is merely a matter of changing modes of thought. Thus, as radical as the Young Hegelians take themselves to be, their epochal revolt “is supposed to have taken place in the realm of pure thought.”⁹ They are not engaged where Marx would like, in “combating the real existing world.”¹⁰ Marx’s criticism is scathing: “It has not occurred to any one of these philosophers to inquire into the connection of German philosophy with German reality, the connection of their criticism with their own material surroundings.”¹¹ Instead, they see the problems of society as merely a matter of the phrasing of concepts, and so they offer as opposition “nothing but phrases to these phrases.”¹²

We should discern in Marx’s critique a desire to free the people from any pre-existing ideology which might secure the privilege of the powerful and preclude improving the welfare of the working class. The question for leftist political thought ever since has been how best to do this. For Marx, it seemed self-evident that a materialist assessment of reality should partner with the practical mobilization of the workers. The praxis and the theory of international socialism were united from birth—the liberation of the masses from their exploitation would coincide with their intellectual liberation from the fairytales and fantasies used by their rulers to maintain the status quo. It’s important to see here in this union of praxis and theory a kind of double-edged assumption about ideology—that ideology was inherently shaped and manipulated by the powerful, and that ideology was basically synonymous with a kind of mythological, religiously-infused, if not strictly confessional, worldview.

⁸ Marx and Engels, “German Ideology,” 31.

⁹ Marx and Engels, “German Ideology,” 27.

¹⁰ Marx and Engels, “German Ideology,” 30.

¹¹ Marx and Engels, “German Ideology,” 30.

¹² Marx and Engels, “German Ideology,” 30.

Over the last century and a half, these assumptions have not proved to be quite as stable nor as self-evident as Marx took them to be. If Marx's assumption about ideology had a double-edge, we might say that his descendants in the war against ideology now form two broad camps, each of which tends to isolate and elevate one side of the assumption above the other. On the one hand, we have those who are dedicated to seeing ideology primarily as a construct of power, and thus seek to identify and topple entrenched loci of power in society. On the other hand, we have those who still see ideology as primarily a quasi-religious fantastical construct, an obfuscation of a merely materialist assessment of reality, and thus see ideology as a childish diversion from grappling with the bare facts of existence. In the understanding of this second camp, ideology is less imposed by the powerful than merely sustained by the inertia of vestigial cultural traditions.

In the first camp—those who critique ideology in its relation to power—one finds a range of opinions associated with critical theory, hermeneutical philosophy, and identity and cultural studies.¹³ Today, when thinkers seek to resist hegemonic paradigms, they are likely to see power dynamics running across a variety of spectra beyond class alone. As the intellectual historian Mark Lilla points out, Marxism's strength is its all-encompassing explanatory power, “forc[ing] those who adhered to it to look up from their particular situations and engage intellectually with the deep forces shaping history.”¹⁴ Having said that, there has been from the beginning a gaping hole in this otherwise holistic worldview around issues of race, “which it tended to collapse into a matter of class.”¹⁵ Theorists who have engaged with postmodern, postcolonial ideas have noted this silence and expanded our awareness of the complex array of powerful ideological interests at work in society, including not only issues of race but also gender, sexuality, and culture. Kimberlé Crenshaw's notion of “intersectionality,” as an exam-

¹³ A brief list of works representative of this perspective includes: M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009); Kevin Floyd, *The Reification of Desire: Toward a Queer Marxism* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2009); Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: NYU Press, 2005); *Feminism and the Body: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Catherine Kevin (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009); *Reading the Social Body*, eds. Catherine B. Burroughs and Jeffrey David Ehrenreich (Iowa City: IA: University of Iowa Press, 1993); Roberto Esposito, *Persons and Things: From the Body's Point of View* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015).

¹⁴ Mark Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics* (New York: Harper Collins, 2017), Chapter 2, final section, Kindle.

¹⁵ Lilla, *Once and Future*, Chapter 2, last section, Kindle.

ple, has recently gained traction in South African universities by providing a theoretical foundation for the practical need for people oppressed by various intersecting fields of power to express solidarity with each other's suffering.¹⁶

In the second camp—those who critique ideology as irrational, obscurantist, or mythological—we have a range of opinions associated with views of the person arising from the perspectives of neuroscience, evolutionary anthropology, and the developing field of artificial intelligence.¹⁷ Today, those proposing a 'materialist' account of reality are less likely to find in this account—as Marx assumed to be obvious—an assessment of economic dynamics with production at the center. Instead, present-day 'materialist' notions are more indebted to the logical positivism of the Vienna Circle, and to the history of British empiricism which was ultimately as much of an influence on Marx as the debates of German idealism.¹⁸

For the purposes of the present thesis, we have emerging from these two camps two entirely distinct ways of understanding how a greater attention to embodiment might oppose ideological constructs. From the first perspective, a more embodied theory acknowledges the priority of meanings and associations which have been imported onto the body, particularly bodies marginal to the prevailing arbiters of meaning. Theory would then take the body's side to the extent that it sought to liberate the body in some respect, either by suggesting new modes of discourse or by privileging discourse arising from previously unrepresented bodies. From the second perspective, a more embodied theory acknowledges the priority of biology over behavior. Theory takes the body's side to the extent that it recognizes the basic equality of the human species with the rest of the biosphere, seeking to reconfigure our understanding according to the reality of being organisms in a volatile cosmos.

¹⁶ Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43.6 (1991): 1241-1299.

¹⁷ A few works representative of this perspective include: Mark Johnston, *Surviving Death* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2010); John Gray, *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2002); *Metaphysical Grounding: Understanding the Structure of Reality*, eds. Fabrice Correia and Benjamin Schnieder (Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2012); John W. Yolton, *Thinking Matter: Materialism in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

¹⁸ For an enlightening contemporary Marxist approach to materialism, see Terry Eagleton, *Materialism* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2016). Eagleton contrasts his preferred form of materialism, "historical materialism," with other materialisms—cultural, dialectical, mechanical—in a way that draws distinctions among Marx's descendants similar to the approach of this thesis.

The argument of this chapter is to consider in what sense discipleship might serve as ground that takes us outside of ideology by taking us outside of ideation. How is the embodiment of the Christian disciple as a ground for thought able to critique ideology not merely with a counter-ideology, but by working for human liberation while abolishing the notion of human mastery over thought? The argument presented here is not choosing sides between these two opposing camps, but is harkening back to Marx's second critique of the Young Hegelians, that they offer nothing but phrases to oppose other phrases. In that sense, each camp contains within itself two possibilities, a positive sense in which embodiment might truly liberate us from the realm of mere phraseology, and a negative sense in which embodiment might actually turn out to be merely another ideology under the guise of 'body' language. Discipleship might well find itself allied to manifestations of the first possibility while opposing the second. We theorise about the body, but still struggle to theorise as bodies, and thus fail to achieve the unity of praxis and theory which discipleship proposes.

Therefore, the argument of this chapter is that discipleship is the best grounds for understanding what theology has traditionally taken to be its own claim with respect to the body, that the complexity of even our own bodies transcends us. Attentiveness to this obstacle is also a recognition that God confronts us here, more familiar with our bodies than we are, standing on the side of concrete *sōma* to defy the *sarx* to which we are enslaved. The next section will take up a brief consideration of the strengths and limitations of theology's traditional approach to the body.

5.3 The Place of Christian Theology with Respect to Embodiment

Christian thought and rhetoric has a complicated history, to say the least, with respect to the body. The actual use and interaction of bodies in popular piety, worship, and practices of discipline varies widely at different moments and places within church history. Theologically, however, John Paul II captures the general thrust of Christian insight on human embodiment in a series of sermons written over the early 1980's. At the heart of his argument is the attempt to wrestle with the biblical testimony that "all sins are an expression of life according to the flesh, which contrasts with life according to the Spirit."¹⁹ Rather than seeing this as a general

¹⁹ John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan* (Boston: Pauline Books, 1997), 195.

condemnation of embodiment, theology has attempted to distinguish *sarx* which Paul rebukes as the misuse of the body, “the possibility of making bad use of freedom.”²⁰ Faithfulness to God thus encompasses body and spirit, the whole of the human *sōma*, permitting both to find themselves reconciled to their divine purpose. John Paul II identifies this “way which leads to the transformation” of the “discord in the body” as a “victory [that] can and must take place in man’s heart.”²¹

What the Christian tradition thus suggests is that humanity in sin is alienated from its own nature as embodied creature, and that the return to divine intent is also a reconciliation with the body. Biblical *sarx* is not mere physicality, but the disordered use of the body—“man as he has allowed himself to become in contrast with man as God meant him to be.”²² The *sōma* must therefore be crucified not as a general principle, in all its cravings and delights, but only to the extent that it has become a slave to *sarx*. The Christian is, then, a kind of aspiring non-dualist, hoping for the restoration of both flesh and soul in God’s kingdom. The “radical dualism” which might have previously pervaded Christian thought is not biblical, but an importation from “Graeco-Roman civilisation, bifurcating human experience” according to “Hellenistic” rather than “Hebraic patterns of thought.”²³

In a sense, then, Christian theology does share a deep concern with the Greek and Latin thought in which it was cultivated. This concern is that the desires of the body, if left unchecked, could prove ruinous. The soul is thus working at cross purposes with its own senses, and “the aim of both medicine and of philosophical exhortation” in Hellenistic thought was to achieve “an unaffected symbiosis of body and soul.”²⁴ What separates out early Christian theologians from much Greek philosophy, in the words of the church historian Peter Brown, is “their estimate of the horizons of the possible for the body itself.”²⁵ For the Greeks, “the body was there to be administered, not to be changed.”²⁶ For Christian thinkers, however, the possibility of a reunion

²⁰ John Paul II, *Theology and the Body*, 198.

²¹ John Paul II, *Theology and the Body*, 205.

²² William Barclay, *Flesh and Spirit: An Examination of Galatians 5.19-23* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), 22.

²³ Thomas F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), 47.

²⁴ Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia UP, 1988), 27.

²⁵ Brown, *Body and Society*, 31.

²⁶ Brown, *Body and Society*, 31.

with God's intentions for the body seemed presently possible. The right manner and form of teaching and discipline could replace fleshly desires with their more 'spiritual' counterparts. John Cassian, Augustine's Roman contemporary, exemplifies this expectation when he writes that, "Desires for present things cannot be oppressed or plucked out unless salutary dispositions have been introduced to replace the harmful ones that we want to cut off."²⁷ While refusing to deny the body outright, Christian theology only embraced the body to an exceedingly narrow degree. The body was reduced to desire, and since desire could only find its proper place in seeking something 'higher' than those things physically longed for by the body, the body could be accepted, but only to the extent that it became something quite different than what it was.

This peculiar contradiction—that Christians believe the body to be deeply significant only in its capacity to become something else—fed the occasional sense of "aggressive self-neglect" that colored the writings of ascetics and theologians alike.²⁸ It also opened up the possibility that local ideologies of various kinds could become determinative of both what the body ought to look like in its divinely-reconciled form, and what method would lead to that end. If Christianity is often popularly viewed as 'anti-body,' it is to the extent that the form of its own understanding of the body has all too easily permitted other agendas to seize control. Christianity thus often appears as itself the very definition of an ideology antagonistic to the body. From the perspective of the two camps mentioned above, Christian theology appears to serve hegemonic interests by either excluding the value of marginal bodies, or by reinforcing moralisms that seem entirely arbitrary in relation to the truth of humanity as mere organism.

With respect to Christian theology, then, the aim of this chapter is to propose that the underlying sentiment is correct, that God is more squarely on the side of our bodies than we are. Reconciliation with God is thus the entry into reconciliation with our bodies. The problem, for theology, has been the same problem which afflicts various philosophical claims to embodiment. Theology's approach also carries a double possibility. There is a positive one, that embodied theory can truly be liberative by understanding itself indebted to the body as the locus for divine activity. And there is a negative one, that theology can impose upon the body merely one more conceptual agenda about what the body ought to be for.

²⁷ John Cassian, *Coll.* 12.5.3 as quoted in Thomas L. Humphries, Jr., *Ascetic Pneumatology from John Cassian to Gregory the Great* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013), 37.

²⁸ Hannah Hunt, *Clothed in the Body: Asceticism, the Body and the Spiritual in the late Antique Era* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2012), 5.

This chapter will explore discipleship as yielding the form of thought necessary to resolve this theological problem. In imitation of Christ, in participation in God's activity, discipleship forms a grounds for theological speech that engages our bodies as they currently are, not as we hope them to be in the eschaton. Discipleship, as the participation in the life of Christ which assumes our body into the divine intent, nonetheless resists any attempt to idealise the body as it should be. Instead, it permits us to discover our actual bodies as the site where obedience is realised. What discipleship separates us from is not our bodies, but from our confidence that the ways in which we conceptualise our bodies necessarily represent their actuality. For a theology after discipleship, the pressing divide is not between fleshly desire and spiritual desire. The divide is between our bodies as we think of them and our bodies as they actually exist. In this respect, even the assumption that the body is meaningfully reducible to desire proves to be merely ideological. What we are after is a way of theorising as bodies, not a way of theorising about bodies which draws from some other conceptual field. Only then we could we properly be said to have found a theology of embodiment.

In approaching this task, we will begin by considering an unlikely source, the rare Christian theologian to ever use the word *gnostikoi* affectionately, Clement of Alexandria. The intensity of Clement's focus on the practice of discipleship and its relation to the claims of Greek philosophy will serve as a starting point for considering how theology might respond to the priority of God's call.

5.4 Discipleship and Embodiment in Clement of Alexandria

5.4.1. Background

Clement of Alexandria's career spanned the end of the second century and the beginning of the third. The timing of his work as well as his location in one of the Mediterranean's most cosmopolitan cities placed him at the nexus of a wide variety of philosophical influences. A significant portion of contemporary studies on Clement are about attempting to read his work while teasing apart the impact of no less than "three distinct streams: the Jewish-Alexandrine philosophy, the Platonic tradition (which includes both the school-Platonism of the second

century A.D. and Neoplatonism), and Gnosticism.”²⁹ To this we might add traces of Aristotelianism and a strong affinity for Stoicism as well.³⁰ While these influences will be acknowledged at points in this section, their sheer variety points to something quite unique about Clement himself, and the aim here is to focus on his work on its own merits, as it contributes to the present question.

Common to these streams of influence, however, is a Greek pedagogy of combining philosophical speculation with a regiment of moral training out of the conviction that true philosophising could only be achieved while living truly. This notion belongs to the Valentinian school of Gnosticism, which “thought theoretical reflection and moral instruction went hand in hand” and that “theoretical philosophical discourse was only one way of ‘doing philosophy.’”³¹ It also belongs, however, to Platonism via Philo of Alexandria, who reconfigured “Judaism as a philosophy for the passions, a school for self-control.”³² At all points, then, it would have seemed self-evident to Clement that formation in Christian thought was equally as much a formation in the practice of Christian living.

Moreover, Clement presupposes an apologetic conviction that Christianity is even more richly equipped to conform the thinker to the thought than the Greek schools of philosophy. It is worth mentioning this in the context of Clement’s positive appropriation of Gnosticism—the Christian, in his coinage, is a truer gnostic than the Gnostics in virtue of being one “who imitates God as far as possible.”³³ This should serve as the first indication that Clement is alluding to features of gnosticism far different than we might assume. The principal associations of gnosticism as it is commonly used today is with a philosophy which “distinguished between the god who created this material world and the ultimate God.”³⁴ Thus, Gnosticism is understood as explicitly opposed to embodiment, seeking “an esoteric . . . knowledge of God . . . which is

²⁹ Salvatore R.C. Lilla, *Clement of Alexandria: A Study in Christian Platonism and Gnosticism* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971), 227.

³⁰ Lilla, *Clement of Alexandria*, 1.

³¹ Ismo Dunderberg, *Beyond Gnosticism: Myth, Lifestyle, and Society in the School of Valentinus* (New York: Columbia UP, 2008), 14.

³² Stanley K. Stowers, *A Rereading of Romans: Justice, Jews, and Gentiles* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1994), 58.

³³ Clement of Alexandria, “The *Stromata*, or *Miscellanies*” in *Fathers of the Second Century: Hermas, Tatian, Athenogoras, Theophilus, and Clement of Alexandria* (Anti-Nicene Fathers, Volume II), ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, available at ccel.org/ccel/clement_alex, originally printed in 1885): 638-1266, on 788.

³⁴ David Brakke, *The Gnostics: Myth, Ritual, and Diversity in Early Christianity* (Cambridge, Harvard UP, 2010), 19.

based on revelation and inner enlightenment”³⁵ leading to “a liberation of humans from the constraints of earthy life.”³⁶ However, current research on ancient gnosticism suggest that it contained a far greater diversity—almost unhelpfully so—than this stereotype admits. The modern caricature is mostly indebted to the 17th-century revival of gnostic studies led by Henry More, which defined gnosticism entirely by how it was portrayed by its most vociferous Christian opponents, Irenaeus chief among them.³⁷ Modern historical research has revealed that the schools of thought which have traditionally been labeled gnostic are so philosophically diffuse that Karen King—at the beginning of her comprehensive account of the present state of scholarship—can assert that, “There was and is no such thing as Gnosticism, if we mean by that some kind of ancient religious entity with a single origin and a distinct set of characteristics.”³⁸ ‘Gnosticism’ as a category might well disappear were it not so perpetually useful as an accusation against one’s enemies, such that one can find analyses suggesting—as Ioan Culianu laments—that “not only Gnosis was gnostic, but the catholic authors were gnostic, the neoplatonic too, Reformation was gnostic, Communism was gnostic, Nazism was gnostic, liberalism, existentialism, and psychoanalysis were gnostic too.”³⁹ All of this is mentioned to note that Clement’s affinity with a particular understanding of Gnosticism should not necessarily suggest an attempt to ascend out of the body. Instead, as we shall see, Clement takes Christianity to be the supreme gnosis not because it renounces the body, but because it’s own school of formation leads the Christian body into God’s reign.

5.4.2 *Clement and the Imitatio Christi*

Clement’s work largely survives in three books, the *Protrepticus*, the *Paedagogus*, and the *Stromata*.⁴⁰ Together, they form an intellectual path towards “full eschatological adulthood,”

³⁵ Roelof van den Broek, *Gnostic Religion in Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2013), 3.

³⁶ Kurt Rudolph, *Die Gnosis: Wesen und Geschichte einer spätantiken Religion*, 3rd ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1990, originally published in 1977), 7.

³⁷ Brakke, *Gnostics*, 19.

³⁸ Karen L. King, *What is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2003), 1-2.

³⁹ Ioan P. Culianu, “The Gnostic Revenge: Gnosticism and Romantic Literature,” in *Religionstheorie und Politische Theologie, Band 2: Gnosis und Politik*, ed. Jacob Taubes (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1984: 290-306, on 290.

⁴⁰ A fourth book, the *Hypotyposesis*, is referred to in other sources, but is no longer extant. The *Hypotyposesis*, however, is at the centre of later controversies about Clement’s orthodoxy. For more on this, see Piotr Ashwin-Siejkowski, *Clement of Alexandria on Trial: The Evidence of ‘Heresy’ from Photius’ Bibliotheca*, (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

in the words of one commentator, an invitation into the “the gradual process of man’s relationship with God” which unfolds over Clement’s work.⁴¹ For Clement, this process of entering into a full relationship with God requires navigating through a concern which he inherited from Greek philosophy, namely, the relation of virtue to the passions. It is in this respect that the Stoic influence shines through most clearly in Clement’s thought, although he retains a distinctively Christian approach to this question. The conclusion of Clement’s approach is that discipleship directs us towards the body in its deepest particularity, and in doing so subverts our ideological attempts to subsume the body under some other notion, including our understanding of the primacy of desire.

Clement’s unequivocal starting point is the person of Christ. “If thou desirest truly to see God,” he writes early in the *Protrepticus*, “set thyself earnestly to find Christ.”⁴² Christ is “the door,” Clement acknowledges, alluding to John 10:7, and is our port of entry “through whom alone God is beheld.”⁴³ Quoting from 1 Cor. 11:1—“be imitators of me as I am of Christ”—Clement argues that the quest to imitate Christ is the route to “assimilation to God,” which ought to constitute “the aim of faith.”⁴⁴ One who enters into this imitation of Christ is the only one worthy to bear the name of a gnostic, a true knower, “For the gnostic must, as far as is possible, imitate God.”⁴⁵ Following Christ should thus be understood equally as being “impressed with the closest likeness, that is, with the mind of the Master.”⁴⁶ It is in this sense that the result of discipleship can be understood as a kind of theosis, insofar as the disciple has “received a sort of quality akin to the Lord Himself.”⁴⁷ This quality of mind is knowledge, it is the state of gnostic perfection, wherein truth is known face to face, “hav[ing] converse with God through the great High Priest, being like the Lord, up to the measure of his capacity, in the whole service of God.”⁴⁸

⁴¹ Veronika Cernuskova, “The Concept of *eupatheia* in Clement of Alexandria,” in *Studia Patristica LXVI: Papers presented at the Sixteenth International Conference on Patristic Studies held in Oxford 2011*, vol. 14, (Leuven: Peeters, 2013): 87-97, on p. 96.

⁴² Clement of Alexandria, “Exhortation to the Heathen,” in *Fathers of the Second Century: Hermas, Tatian, Athenogoras, Theophilus, and Clement of Alexandria* (Anti-Nicene Fathers, Volume II), ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, available at ccel.org/ccel/clement_alex, originally printed in 1885): 376-449, on pp. 382-3.

⁴³ Clement, “Exhortation,” 383.

⁴⁴ Clement, “Stromata,” 804.

⁴⁵ Clement, “Stromata,” 931.

⁴⁶ Clement, “Stromata,” 1080.

⁴⁷ Clement “Stromata,” 1097.

⁴⁸ Clement, “Stromata,” 1119.

As always, however, the notion of the imitation of Christ requires more specificity, which is also to say, it must be confronted by Christ. For Clement, the person of Christ exemplifies divine *apatheia*, and here the intersection with Stoic concerns is most apparent. Clement describes the “really true piety” which obeys God as the “unswerving abstraction from the body and its passions.”⁴⁹ Better than conformity to a contested notion of goodness is “to become free of passion,”⁵⁰ and so those aspiring to perfection must be “rescue[d] . . . from all passion of the soul.”⁵¹ Here we seemingly have Clement at his most gnostic in the common sense of the word, suggesting an elevation beyond the sensory body in order to apprehend the truth of pure intellect.

Two alternatives for reading Clement emerge. The first is to see the array of Greek influences on his work as determinative, to suggest that he has fashioned a Christian theology according to Hellenistic ends. The second, however, is to read Christ as determinative, to suggest that Christian thought is already an effective means for accomplishing the best goals of Greek philosophy without being overly determined by them.

Should the first approach be correct, then a definition of divine *apatheia* would begin with a doctrine of impassibility. The stillness of the triune self would be akin to a deprivation of experience, a transcendence of the pains and pleasures—physical or spiritual—which move mortals. But Clement’s understanding of divine *apatheia* is not that it forms the condition for God’s ontological aloofness, but that it forms the condition for forgiveness. God rises above mere passions by not seeking vengeance even when it is deserved, and in this respect we ought to associate *apatheia* with divine restraint, forbearance, and compassion. It is in this sense that God is “unmindful of injury,” in Clement’s phrase, not because God doesn’t experience it, but because it does not divert God’s intention, in the words of one commentator, “to have a super-human ability to *forgive* offenses and, going further, not even to *remember* them.”⁵² God is unfeeling not in the sense of being unaffected, but in the sense of being un beholden to the way a typical human being would respond to offense. Moreover, for Clement, divine *apatheia* is the guarantor of God’s free choice to show love and grace to humanity. Should God forgive

⁴⁹ Clement, “Stromata,” 973.

⁵⁰ Clement, “Stromata,” 923.

⁵¹ Clement, “Stromata,” 1058.

⁵² Judith L. Kovacs, “Saint Paul as Apostle of *Apatheia*: *Stromateis VII*, Chapter 14,” in *The Seventh Book of the Stromateis: Proceedings of the Colloquium on Clement of Alexandria* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 199-216, on 207.

humanity because of an empathy like “the affection in animals to their progeny,”⁵³ then God’s goodness would be a kind of self-preservation—like loving like. But because God is not bound to be affected only by the plight of God’s own kind, God “sees in what evils we are involved”⁵⁴ and yet chooses love for humanity though we are “by nature wholly estranged.”⁵⁵ Consequently, it is God whose example defines *apatheia*, not God who is subjected to a human expectation of stoicism. And thus, divine *apatheia* is less a dismissal of the flesh than a dismissal of self-serving prejudice.

5.4.3 Superstition and Idolatry

The implications of a disciple’s approach to the body become clearer if we consider the notion of ‘superstition’ in Clement’s apologetic. The *Protrepticus* (or Exhortation) is a preliminary clearing of Hellenism’s intellectual ground. Clement does this by pointing out, in the words of Matyas Havrda, that “the truth claims of Greek philosophers rest upon premises that are also accepted on faith, prior to demonstration.”⁵⁶ Herein lies the accusation that the Greeks, both religiously and philosophically, have given themselves over to superstition, though we would be remiss to read this anachronistically as an accusation of irrationality. Rather, in Clement’s distinction between superstition and belief, “the contrast is between false and true conceptions of God.”⁵⁷

In a later passage, Clement critiques the Valentinian form of gnosticism for not only prescribing an ascent out of the world, but presuming that the gnosis required for this ascent is granted to a few, “a class saved by nature,” a “different race.”⁵⁸ They take this *gnosis*, in Clement’s view, to be granted to them not from some external source, per se, but in virtue of their possessing a unique perceptual ability. Thus the Valentinians represent a kind of extreme empiricism, believing “that knowledge springs up in their own selves (who are saved by nature) through the advantage of a germ of superior excellence.”⁵⁹ What the Valentinians thereby claim

⁵³ Clement, “Stromata,” 778.

⁵⁴ Clement, “Stromata,” 777.

⁵⁵ Clement, “Stromata,” 778.

⁵⁶ Matyas Havrda, “Demonstrative Method in *Stromateis VII*: Context, Principles, and Purpose,” in *The Seventh Book of the Stromateis: Proceedings of the Colloquium on Clement of Alexandria* (Leiden: Brill, 2012): 261-275, on 266.

⁵⁷ George Karamanolis, “Clement on Superstition and Religious Belief,” in *The Seventh Book of the Stromateis: Proceedings of the Colloquium on Clement of Alexandria* (Leiden: Brill, 2012): 113-130, on 115.

⁵⁸ Clement “Stromata,” 897.

⁵⁹ Clement “Stromata,” 746.

is that “knowledge is a state of mind that results from demonstration.”⁶⁰ But Clement contests this, precisely because “first principles are incapable of demonstration.”⁶¹ The critique is thus a familiar one, not unlike the questions raised against rationality by Pascal and Kierkegaard. The first principle which asserts that all knowledge must be demonstrated through sensation cannot, itself, be demonstrated through sensation.

What the Valentinians represent as an extreme example is present across Hellenistic thought, in Clement’s understanding. The Greeks assert that “that alone exists which can be touched and handled.”⁶² This is the origin of their metaphysics, the attempt to extrapolate categories from observation—“they very piously defend the existence of certain intellectual and bodiless forms descending somewhere from above from the invisible world, vehemently maintaining that there is a true essence.”⁶³ Clement draws our attention back to the original sense of metaphysics as a taxonomical project, a sense which has become obscured in our contemporary usage of metaphysical to mean ‘that which exists non-materially.’ Clement’s critique of metaphysics is that it is never anything more than exactly what it claims to be—a meta-level analysis of the physical, and thus the projection of a narrow perception of categories into the realm of universal truth.

False, superstitious conceptions of God arise, therefore, from those “beguiled by the contemplation of the heavens, and trusting to their sight alone,” who “call[ed] the stars gods from their motion.”⁶⁴ In this way, “men invented for themselves gods to worship.”⁶⁵ Clement writes at great length in the *Protrepticus* about the rampant immorality in the Greek pantheon, and the way that it served as “the fountain of insensate wickedness.”⁶⁶ In light of his larger project, however, Clement should be viewed less as a latter-day Xenophanes than a proto-F Feuerbach. The concern is not only that the gods are unworthy of being associated with true godliness, but that the gods are actually projections of desire. The gods are fashioned to attempt a pagan sanctification of ‘fleshliness’ in the true Pauline sense. They are merely examples of personal fantasies imposed upon reality in order to satisfy humanity’s avarice in its various forms.

⁶⁰ Clement, “Stromata,” 748.

⁶¹ Clement, “Stromata,” 747.

⁶² Clement, “Stromata,” 748.

⁶³ Clement, “Stromata,” 748.

⁶⁴ Clement, “Exhortation,” 390.

⁶⁵ Clement, “Exhortation,” 401.

⁶⁶ Clement, “Exhortation,” 401.

Importantly, then, Clement's critique of idolatry is not that it represents a clumsy, impious embodiment, soiling pristine ideality by manifesting it in materiality. Quite the opposite, his critique is that idolatry is a subjugation of the material to humanity's false ideality. The real transgression is not that someone has deigned to represent the divine in earth or stone, but that someone has imposed a false vision of the divine onto the Creator's world.

The Christian alternative, in Clement's view, is to recoil from false ideality, to admit that "the knowledge of ignorance is, then, the first lesson in walking according to the Word."⁶⁷ Having admitted this, the chastened intellect looks for a kind of knowledge that can only come from the "Instructor . . . the holy God Jesus, the Word."⁶⁸ "Having sought," then, the "ignorant man . . . finds the teacher; and finding has believed, and believing has hoped; and henceforward having loved, is assimilated to what was loved—endeavouring to be what he first loved."⁶⁹ This endeavouring returns us to discipleship, and to the imitation of Christ, albeit cautiously. Clement, not unlike Kierkegaard, notes a difficulty in the language of imitation. He prefers to speak of being conformed "in the likeness" of Christ.⁷⁰ A mere imitator differs from one being transformed into Christ's own likeness "as that which is set on fire differs from that which is illuminated."⁷¹ Imitation on its own may bear a passing similarity to the work of Christ, but is ultimately flailing, disordered, subject to the confusion of the imitator's internal struggles. As principle, imitation is inferior to participation in the particularity of Christ, the source of knowledge.

In sum, Clement asserts that the real obstacle to the truth of God is the assumption that one has tapped into universal categories on the basis of experience. In this assumption, one inadvertently projects one's own consciousness onto the universe and, in actual fact, subordinates the material to the conceptual. The path on which Christ leads the disciple out of this morass is simultaneously a self-denial and a coming-to-terms with the body. This is *apatheia* in the best

⁶⁷ Clement, "Stromata," 946.

⁶⁸ Clement of Alexandria, "The Instructor (*Paedagogus*)," in *Fathers of the Second Century: Hermas, Tatian, Athenogoras, Theophilus, and Clement of Alexandria* (Anti-Nicene Fathers, Volume II), ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, available at ccel.org/ccel/clement_alex, originally printed in 1885): 450-637, on 481.

⁶⁹ Clement, "Stromata," 946.

⁷⁰ Clement, "Stromata," 873.

⁷¹ Clement, "Stromata," 873.

possible sense, in imitation of God. It is not a loss of the body with all of its sensations, emotions, and longings, but the loss of the categories—including the notion of our own supposedly independent and unadulterated desires—which we impose upon our bodies.

Clement takes the purest manifestation of this Christian embodiment to be found in the unsettling splendour of martyrdom. Here the contradiction between *sarx* and *sōma* becomes startlingly visceral—nothing could require a greater disavowal of *sarx*, and yet no form of witness could be more invested in the glorification of *sōma*. Martyrdom can be nothing less than faithfulness to God made completely manifest in the body. As such, it is both an affirmation of the body’s place in God’s reign and the starkest challenge to our assumptions about the proper use of a body. The martyr bears witness in triplicate—“to himself that he is faithful . . . to the tempter, that he in vain envied him who is faithful through love; and to the Lord, of the inspired persuasion in reference to His doctrine, from which he will not depart through fear of death.”⁷² This content of this testimony is “the perfect work of love.”⁷³ The martyr “goes to the Lord, his friend, for whom he voluntarily gave his body,”⁷⁴ and thereby demonstrates where the body stands in relation to the Lord. Repenting of our delusions and obeying in our flesh, we become “a witness both by life and word.”⁷⁵ Martyrdom is thus both the Christian’s aspiration and her present way of life. “We choose some pleasures and shun others,” only because, “it is not every pleasure that is a good thing.”⁷⁶ Acknowledging this is not to deny the body, but to deny the reduction of our embodiment to mere desire. Therefore, that which is “to be abstained from” is not abstained from “for their own sakes, but for the sake of the body.”⁷⁷

5.4.4 *The Particularity of Discipleship in the Paedagogus*

Clement’s second book, the *Paedagogus*, is his extended attempt to render the nature of this ongoing Christian embodiment as practically and concretely as possible, to “compendiously describe what the man who is called a Christian ought to be during the whole of his life.”⁷⁸ The specificity of Clement’s advice is utterly unique among patristic writers. The *Paedagogus* includes individual chapters on the way Christians should eat, drink, socialise, adorn themselves,

⁷² Clement, “Stromata,” 868.

⁷³ Clement, “Stromata,” 868.

⁷⁴ Clement, “Stromata,” 868.

⁷⁵ Clement, “Stromata,” 868.

⁷⁶ Clement, “Stromata,” 870.

⁷⁷ Clement, “Stromata,” 870.

⁷⁸ Clement, “Instructor,” 510.

and look after their health. By modern standards, his guidelines range from the sensible—mockery at the expense of another is no way to joke if “the end of a banquet is friendliness”⁷⁹—to the bizarre—“the hiccup is to be quietly transmitted with the expiration of the breath, the mouth being composed becomingly, and not gaping and yawning like the tragic masks.”⁸⁰ The *Paedagogus* is filled with admonitions that seem not only obscure but potentially repressive: when eating, “it is not proper that water should be supplied in too great profusion; in order that the food may not be drowned;”⁸¹ “we are not to laugh perpetually, for that is going beyond bounds;”⁸² “let the head of men be shaven, unless it has curly hair.”⁸³

Here, again, we should consider that there are two options for making use of Clement. The common temptation is to read the *Paedagogus* as a preface to discipleship, as an attempt to codify an abstract truth about right and wrong which must be observed in order to follow God. Read in this way, the intrusive and seemingly arbitrary specificity of Clement’s verdicts can seem almost horrifying. Clement, in this reading, appears to be guilty of imposing his own superstitions on the body, of constructing a set of conceptual parameters out of thin air which must govern the body in every respect.

Another option, however, is to read the *Paedagogus* as an inductive conclusion drawn from discipleship—that the task of following Christ will incorporate the body in its deepest particularity, and will demand a union of *pneuma* and *sōma* in even the most mundane activity. In this second reading, Clement begins with the sentiment—echoing Eph. 6:7 or Phil. 1:27⁸⁴—that Christians must always “conduct ourselves as in the Lord’s presence.”⁸⁵ The *Paedagogus* reads differently if, instead of appearing as an imperious, authoritative Christian *nomos*, it appears as Clement’s best guess about how faithfulness is carried out as one grows aware that “the compassion God Himself set the flesh free.”⁸⁶ Thus, for example, Clement is not suggesting that one ought “to abstain wholly from various kinds of food,” but only that Christians “are not

⁷⁹ Clement, “Instructor,” 539.

⁸⁰ Clement, “Instructor,” 542.

⁸¹ Clement, “Instructor,” 521.

⁸² Clement, “Instructor,” 536.

⁸³ Clement, “Instructor,” 611.

⁸⁴ Eph: 6:7—“Render service with enthusiasm, as to the Lord and not to men and women.” Phil 1:27—“Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.”

⁸⁵ Clement, “Instructor,” 527.

⁸⁶ Clement, “Instructor,” 579.

to be taken up about them.”⁸⁷ What it might mean to not be ‘taken up about’ food is a matter of debate, but the point is that discipleship incorporates lived existence at even this level. So, even Clement’s admonition to ‘let the head of men be shaven’ is prefaced by a certain hesitance—“About the hair, the following seems right.”⁸⁸ In this way, Clement is not far removed from Paul, cautioning that a particular bit of wisdom may come from “I and not the Lord.”⁸⁹ The recoil that one might feel at Clement’s archaic moralizing is not necessarily a reaction to the idea that the body might be a moral object in even its smallest details. After all, we are no less inclined to make judgments with moral implications about small glances, dietary choices, or off-handed remarks—even a hairstyle remains a potential site for an ethical or political stance. The objection is not, per se, to the idea that some ways of using the body are better than others, but to the seeming nature and source of Clement’s judgments.

Put another way, the *Paedagogus* can challenge us on a deeper level than mere polemics about the ethics of consumption, if it is understood within the broader context of Clement’s work. This deeper challenge is to provoke us with a question that is difficult to even articulate. What would be the form and manner of thought if it was truly freed from superstition, and thus if thought did not reflect on itself as embodied, but simply originated in the use of the body? Discipleship is a Christian form of answering this question. The call of God confronts us with a claim on our bodies at their most mundane particularity. There are particular ways of using this body that are equally the deepest way of relating to God—a way which can be called, with qualifications, the imitation of Christ. As the body conforms to the presence of Christ’s own body, only then can something like a proper conceptuality emerge. In this way, discipleship questions whether we even know what it is like to live in our own bodies, and whether we can speak of them properly until we do.

This is not to suggest that theology after discipleship is utterly removed from current thinking about the nature of embodiment. It would be a misunderstanding to simply file the claims made here under the heading of support or opposition to embodied reflection. Rather, it is to say that within current discussions about the body, there are two parallel streams which are equally present if not always acknowledged. There is a stream—affirmed by discipleship—which

⁸⁷ Clement, “Instructor,” 514.

⁸⁸ Clement, “Instructor,” 611.

⁸⁹ 1 Cor. 7:12

acknowledges the body's particularity as a subversion of any attempt to reprimatinate conceptuality's priority over the body. And there is a stream—contested by discipleship—which speaks often of the body, but only fills that terminology with theoretical constructs different in content but not in structure to the ideologies which preceded them. In order to develop this thought, the next section will take up a brief consideration of the current philosophical and theological language around embodiment.

5.5 Two Streams of Thought in Philosophies of Embodiment

5.5.1 Introduction

Earlier in the chapter we alluded to two broad fields of philosophical approaches to embodiment—a theoretical approach which reads the body as a field of meaning, and an empirical approach which reduces the body to its physical processes. A great deal of the antagonism between these competing approaches to embodiment arises from the accusation and counter-accusation that their opponents are guilty of filtering the body through an ideological lens. The empiricist cannot abide the discursive level at which the critical theorist interprets and re-inscribes the body. Likewise, however, the theorist cannot abide the empiricist's claim of being responsible only to the evidence, unaffected by any ideology at all. In the words of Anthony Pinn, "For those prioritizing the discursive body, a turn to a 'natural' body would constitute a metaphysical foundationalism deeply troubling and misguided when such a turn assumes a pre-discourse existence of the body."⁹⁰ The empiricist takes an appeal to discourse to be a subordination of bare reality to a preexisting conceptuality. The theorist takes an appeal to neutral observation to be likewise a subordination of reality to a preexisting conceptuality, albeit unacknowledged. This is an important point to dwell on for a moment, because critical theory—understanding itself to be faced with the false consciousness of western rationalism—has taken an understandable but not necessarily desirable route.

5.5.2 *The Body Under Distortion*

As an example of a critical theoretical approach to embodiment, consider Frantz Fanon's experience of the dawning realization of his blackness in the encounter with white society. This realisation is less discovered than forced upon him, the stares and epithets leave him "assailed

⁹⁰ Anthony B. Pinn, *Embodiment and the New Shape of Black Theological Thought* (New York: NYU Press, 2010), 35.

at various points” and so “the corporeal schema crumbled, its place taken by a racial epidermal schema.”⁹¹ Having previously understood himself as simply a human being, prevailing white culture forces upon his body its own understanding and expectations for blackness, and abuses him accordingly. Fanon describes the experience as a multiplication, becoming aware of himself as a “triple person . . . I was responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, for my ancestors.”⁹² Previously, Fanon had merely lived in his body, unaware that any particular meaning could be foisted upon his skin, and now he lives as a black body, pressed on all sides by the conceptual schema of blackness which white society invents and then uses as an excuse to oppress. In the words of George Nancy:

The Black body becomes a ‘prisoner’ of an imago—an elaborate distorted image of the Black, an image whose reality is held together through white bad faith and projection—that is ideologically orchestrated to leave no trace of its social and historical construction.⁹³

Furthermore, white supremacy finds itself deeply invested in imprisoning black bodies within blackness, attempting to “foreclose any possibility of slippage between the historically imposed imago and how the Black body lives its reality.”⁹⁴ Fanon is no longer afforded the innocence of merely living from his body. “All I wanted,” he laments, “was to be a man among other men.”⁹⁵

One could take up the same lament from a variety of perspectives. The feminist theorist, Elisabeth Grosz, finds the same phenomenon occurring with respect to gendered bodies:

Misogynist thought has commonly found a convenient self-justification for women’s secondary social positions by containing them within bodies that are represented, even constructed, as frail, imperfect, unruly, and unreliable, subject to various intrusions which are not under conscious control.⁹⁶

⁹¹ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 2008, original published in 1952), 84.

⁹² Fanon, *Black Skin*, 84.

⁹³ George Nancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008), 109-110.

⁹⁴ Nancy, *Black Bodies*, 110.

⁹⁵ Fanon, *Black Skin*, 85.

⁹⁶ Elisabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1994), 13.

One would expect to find a similar analysis arising from queer bodies, transgender bodies, disabled bodies, from any place where the actuality of a human body defies conventionality, and then is met by the cultural norms which depend on such conventions with a raging hostility.

Much work on embodiment from the perspective of critical theory rightly desires to take up the cause of the marginalised body, suffocating under a meaning it neither created nor chose. One popular strategy for doing so, however, is largely indebted to the so-called ‘linguistic turn’ of continental philosophy, and specifically to a psychoanalytic form of left Hegelianism. Judith Butler alludes to this indebtedness while introducing the work of György Lukács:

Whereas Marx claimed that capitalism treats humans as objects, and objects as humans, Lukács furthered this view of commodity fetishism to consider how reality is given a ‘second nature’—a full makeover—so that, under these historic conditions, humans misrepresent reality systematically.⁹⁷

Understood from this lineage, the fetishism of capitalist—or white supremacist, or misogynist—ideology is a systematic misrepresentation of reality arising from a set of historical conditions. This leaves us with two levels at which we may resist. At one level, obviously, we may work to change the conditions giving rise to such a misrepresentation. But at a second level—the realm of the intellectual—the aim is to conquer hegemonic fetishism by overthrowing and replacing it with conceptions arising from marginalized voices. Marx’s admonition with respect to capital and labor—to “simplify and sharpen the contrast and thereby accelerate its resolution”⁹⁸—offers hope for the intellectual that their work will change the movement of history. At this level, in order to be liberated from psychological and material shackles, the first step is for ‘blackness’ or ‘womanhood’ to be re-constructed from the perspective of the relevant bodies. This alternative construction, if properly thought through as a way of understanding not only bodies, but every aspect of life under a prevailing culture, opens up opportunities for subversion, re-appropriation, or contradiction which might shift the prevailing culture in a productive direction.

⁹⁷ Judith Butler, “Introduction,” in György Lukács, *Soul and Form*, eds. John T. Sanders and Katie Terezakis, trans. Anna Bostock (New York: Columbia UP, 2010): 1-15, on 2.

⁹⁸ Karl Marx, *Ökonomisch-philosophische Manuskripte, mit Kommentar von Michael Quante* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2009), 102.

Perhaps the best example of such a strategy emerges from the South African context in the legacy of the Black Consciousness movement. Steve Biko's desire to excise the influence of white liberals from the struggle against apartheid was explicitly an appeal to the kind of left Hegelian logic described here. Biko acknowledges the artificiality of the racial ideology which funded apartheid. Its philosophical architects "had to create some kind of barrier between black and whites so that the whites could enjoy privileges at the expense of blacks and still feel free to give a moral justification for the obvious exploitation that pricked even the hardest of white consciences."⁹⁹ White liberals, however well-intentioned in attempting to lead the struggle, cannot overthrow for themselves the presumptions of apartheid ideology; "they do not believe that blacks can formulate their thoughts without white guidance" and so they "make it their business to control the response of the blacks to the provocation."¹⁰⁰ The problem, Biko says, is in the deficiency of their counter-ideology. They believe that "the thesis is apartheid, the antithesis is non-racialism," and consequently, "the synthesis is very feebly defined."¹⁰¹ Black Consciousness replaces this dialectic with its own construct that it believes will provide a more robust synthesis. Here, "the thesis is in fact a strong white racism and therefore, the antithesis to this must, *ipso facto*, be a strong solidarity amongst the blacks on whom this white racism seeks to prey."¹⁰² Blackness, for Biko—as has often been pointed out—is not necessarily a quality of melanin; it explicitly included South Africa's Coloured and Indian communities, all those 'on whom this white racism seeks to prey.' And thus, Black Consciousness is the exemplar of the attempt to critically re-think embodiment not by rooting it more firmly in the particularity of bodies, *per se*, but by confronting one ideology with another, liberating particular bodies by encouraging them to reframe the conceptions placed upon them.

A significant amount of theoretical work on embodiment correctly diagnoses a problem—that ideologies have been imposed by the hegemonic on the bodies of the powerless, and that these ideologies are useful tools in maintaining an unjust status quo. What is not easily admitted, however, is the possibility that the problem is not a particularly bad ideology, but the very nature of ideology, not a false consciousness, but consciousness. What theory has not fully

⁹⁹ Steve Biko, "Black Consciousness and the Quest for a True Humanity," in *I Write What I Like: A Selection of His Writings*, ed. Aelred Stubbs (Oxford: Heinemann, 2005, originally published in 1987):87-98, on 88.

¹⁰⁰ Biko, "Black Consciousness," 89.

¹⁰¹ Biko, "Black Consciousness," 90.

¹⁰² Biko, "Black Consciousness," 90.

grappled with is the actual problem of taking the body seriously not as a field of meaning, but as flesh and blood, sitting in a chair, behind a desk or in the classroom or on the streets, theorising. Judith Butler writes about this paradox through the lens of confession in a psychoanalytic context. The theorist analyzes “the content of the confession as a deed;” the weight is placed on the meaning of the prior action which the analyst now regrets.¹⁰³ And yet, the act of confessing is an entirely different “bodily act,” and so the analyst is left to speculate about “what remains continuous between the two acts.”¹⁰⁴ There is of course the mere fact that both deeds are done by one body, but that does not fully capture the analyst’s dilemma. The problem, in some sense, is that theory is better equipped to engage with the meaning of the deed being remembered than the fact that before the analyst, on a couch, in an office, “the body acts again, but this time through the bodily act of speaking.”¹⁰⁵ It is this level of reality which theory struggles to incorporate. Subtly, then, the ‘embodiment’ in which such critical theory engages is no more related than ever to the actuality of a reader’s body. It offers no hope of returning to Fanon the possibility of being ‘a man among other men.’ Theory is simply better at speaking about bodies than in knowing how to speak in an actual body to another actual body. Philosophies of embodiment often cannot do better than assume, without much cause, that these two spheres of embodiment language—the idea of a body and the actual body—necessarily correspond. When they do not, however, much of what qualifies as theorising cannot cope.

5.5.3 *Resistance as Bodies*

Having said that, there already exists within critical theory a secondary stream, a kind of alternative to the alternative. This secondary stream is not fully defined at the theoretical level, as it does not even necessarily represent its own sub-discipline or school of thought. Instead, it is a kind of instinct that exists alongside of theorising not only within critical theory as a whole, but sometimes within the work of a single thinker. It is present in the first level of resistance, in the notion that there might be practical ways to change the historical conditions giving rise to hegemonic ideology. This secondary stream is an instinct towards a deeply pragmatic particularism—a simple expectation that theory must be accountable to action. It is, for instance, the “strong sense” in feminist theology which Serene Jones writes about:

¹⁰³ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 165.

¹⁰⁴ Butler, *Undoing*, 165.

¹⁰⁵ Butler, *Undoing*, 165.

It demands that we invest our lives in ongoing, concrete actions designed to actually make it happen . . . it also includes working for social change in local, everyday ways—how we cook, what we wear, who we are friends with, how we raise children, what we expect our homes to look like and our jobs, if we have them, to include, and, of course, how we worship and practice our faith.¹⁰⁶

It is present in the ambiguity of Catherine Keller's assertion that "feminist theology is straining to translate logos into flesh."¹⁰⁷ Perhaps this means, as is often the case, that feminist theology is attempting to construct a logos which re-conceives a notion of flesh. Or, more promisingly, perhaps this means that feminist theology is attempting to speak from a logos that has taken on flesh. Eboni Marshall Turman hints at the christological dimensions of this kind of enfleshment when she writes that "the very assertion of Jesus Christ's identity as 'truly God, truly man' directly responds to the problem of body by interposing the presence of God in that which is utterly inconceivable to the human rationale."¹⁰⁸ Christology addresses the hegemony of prevailing ideology by "first mak[ing] room for a 'just is' in-itself of Jesus' identity to exist outside the gaze of the arbiters of power who normatively project pathology upon bodies that defy the status quo."¹⁰⁹ The particular 'just-is-ness' of the living Christ already defies the power of hegemonic ideologies which might control Christ-as-idea should he be relegated to the level of mere principle, memory, or recounted deed.

As is hopefully clear already, a theological language following after discipleship finds a kindred spirit in theories of embodiment should they arise from this particularist alternative. Insofar as critical theory invokes actual bodies as a demonstration of the insufficiency of a prevailing ideology's ability to capture reality, then it finds itself doing the work of God. Insofar as critical theory imposes upon bodies a mere alternative conception of what their embodiment ought to mean, then it merely substitutes one 'superstition' for another, in Clement's sense. Consider, for example, Marcella Althaus-Reid's contention that "women's bodies must contribute to theological actions and reflections from the location of hunger, unresolved hunger:

¹⁰⁶ Serene Jones, "Feminist Theology and the Global Imagination," in *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theology*, eds. Mary McClintock Fulkerson and Sheila Briggs (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012): 23-50, on 25.

¹⁰⁷ Catherine Keller, "Returning God: The Gift of Feminist Theology," in *Feminism, Sexuality, and the Return of Religion*, eds. Linda Martín Alcoff and John D. Caputo (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 2011): 55-76, on 61.

¹⁰⁸ Eboni Marshall Turman, *Toward a Womanist Ethic of Incarnation: Black Bodies, the Black Church, and the Council of Chalcedon* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 165.

¹⁰⁹ Turman, *Womanist Ethic*, 165.

hunger for bread and for sexual justice.”¹¹⁰ If this is read to mean that theology must account for hungry women, that theology properly arises from bodies bearing in themselves the marks of participation in Christ’s suffering and striving for justice, then it serves as a useful provocation to any theology which might casually gloss over such a reality. If, however, Althaus-Reid means that accounting for embodiment means a general presupposition about the priority of hunger and sexual justice—that a notion of womanhood is only valid when it incorporates such experiences, and that theology is only valid when it incorporates such womanhood—then we have merely another unhelpfully totalising ideology, however well-intentioned. Theology which follows after discipleship does not enclose the faithful inside a newer, renovated theoretical edifice, but questions whether the church has ever been built upon a theoretical edifice from the beginning.

5.5.4 Conceptuality and the Body

To reflect back on Clement of Alexandria for a moment, the argument being made here is that even philosophies of embodiment are tempted to begin from a starting point other than embodiment. Theory struggles to truly understand itself while truly prioritising the body. What stands in the way is an array of ‘superstitions,’ in Clement’s sense, meaning in this case the prior assumption of a unique access to the categories which define reality. Recall Clement’s critique of the Valentinians, that their gnosis is not delivered by a message from beyond, but is actually a belief in their own unique capacity for perceiving reality. What they and much of Greek thought presume is that sufficient giftedness in such perceptivity can reveal the categorical structures of reality. In doing so, however, they merely project their experience of the physical world onto a metaphysical plane, giving governance of the universe over to a set of ideas limited to their own sphere of experience. Critical theory fails insofar as it begins to resemble this feature of Hellenic thought. Faced with attempts—inevitably oppressive—to classify and sort reality according to supposedly-fundamental first principles, they attempt to classify and sort reality according to a different set of supposedly-fundamental first principles, defined—more than anything—by being antithetical to the original principles. This stream of critical theory presents just as many obstacles to rendering the particularity of embodiment as ever before.

¹¹⁰ Marcella Althaus-Reid, “Doing a Theology from Disappeared Bodies: Theology, Sexuality, and the Excluded Bodies of the Discourses of Latin American Liberation Theology,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theology*, eds. Mary McClintock Fulkerson and Sheila Briggs (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012): 441-455, on 442.

Although most of this section has been focused on theories of embodiment that arise from what can generally be called critical theory, the same analysis could be run with respect to theories of embodiment arising from biological determinism. The radical empiricist is perhaps even more obviously guilty of taking local observations intended to answer a relatively limited question and assuming that from this vantage one has glimpsed the fundamental structure of reality. Indeed, much of post-Kuhnian philosophy of science is about refereeing the—at times, contentious—exchange between comprehensive theoretical paradigms and the actual business of scientific inquiry. The notion of embodiment being advanced in this thesis places itself firmly on the side of empirical inquiry, insofar as that is understood as a gradual and infinitely-expanding accumulation of practical knowledge about nature's functioning, hopefully with the goal of improving humanity's interaction with nature. At the same time, then, it is necessarily opposed to a notion of empirical inquiry which presumes that local observation is the disclosure to a chosen few of the platonic categories structuring reality.

5.5.5 Discipleship and Theorising as Bodies

In sum, Clement of Alexandria should leave the modern reader with a kind of disorientation about the notion of embodiment. This is largely because what he contests is a notion that we take to be self-evident, perhaps so self-evident that it never requires articulation. We take ourselves to be experts, or at least aspiring experts, on our own bodies. Modern thought assumes that either we have (or ought to have) dominion over our bodies, or else that our bodies have dominion over us. Either way, the question is presumed to be one about authority, about who or what gets to decide the proper way to understand and interact with the body. This, however, is precisely the latent dualism from which we struggle to escape. For as long as the body is the subject of theorising, we cannot help but separate our bodies from who we are, or who we want to be, or who someone else has made us. Rather than truly affirming the reality of our physical bodies, too much philosophy of embodiment is about a knowledge and judgment of categorical bodies that happens at some remove from the specificity of how we actually live. The only way to truly subvert dualism would be to strive for a kind of thought that purely arises from life in the body, rather than attempting to recursively mediate a relationship between our bodies and how we understand them.

The claim of this thesis is that Christian discipleship is the path towards working oneself into a true reconciliation of all the disparate parts contained in the holistic *sōma*. Doing so, however, is also the attempt to set the body free from *sarx*, defined not as pleasure or sensation, but as a

wide variety of cultural conceptions about what the body must be for. By walking step by step into a deeper relationship with God—being aware that this movement is quite literal, a manifestation of faith in the *coutumes* of daily existence—the Christian hopes to one day become a non-dualist. Applied to the main purpose of this thesis—considering the shape of theology after discipleship—the conclusion is that theology must not be thought of as the parameters which bind and guide the Christian way. Instead, theology must re-think itself as that which emerges from bodies who are already placed by God on the Christian way.

Thus, the disciple often finds common cause with those who—theoretically or practically—are subverting totality, so long as this subversion does not become its own totality. This is not because the Christian disciple is opposed to totality in principle, but because she recognises the endlessly self-serving ways in which sinful humanity authors its own totalising discourses. All of these idols must be struck down by the only God deserving to be called a whole, a universal, and all subsequent notions of what it means to speak about universals must arise from fidelity to a universal God born in a manger. The disciple is not unthinkingly on the side of subverting order, for the obvious reason that the supposed subversive might be serving some other tyrant. The perpetual question for the disciple is not how to subvert, but how to allow one's own consciousness to be subverted by the universal-particular. In this cause, the Christian disciple might find quite instructive the sort of approaches to embodiment which attempt to “envisage transcendence as a limitless array of material re-configurations in which the extraordinary reveals itself in the mundane.”¹¹¹ The Christian disciple should allow these theories to draw her attention to the injustices perpetrated against particular bodies, especially when they are locked into artificial ideological cages. In faithfulness to God, the disciple might well take up the physical manifestations of suffering or resistance to such ideologies out of the hope that following a call to justice which also subverts one's own privileged pretensions to authority might thereby serve as an entry into conformity with Christ.

The Christian disciple thus makes a bold claim, that God is more attuned to our bodies than we are, that we cannot help but afflict our own bodies when we impose on them our ideas, desires, and expectations about what they should be. Among contemporary theologians, few have made this point as profoundly or persistently as Sarah Coakley. In the spirit of finishing this chapter

¹¹¹ Sheila Briggs, “What is Feminist Theology?” in *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theology*, eds. Mary McClintock Fulkerson and Sheila Briggs (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012): 73-106, on 87.

with a slightly more constructive suggestion about discipleship and embodiment, it is worth taking a brief detour into Coakley's insights on this front.

5.6 The Body of the Contemplative in the Work of Sarah Coakley

5.6.1 *Theology, Feminism, and Desire*

The Anglican theologian Sarah Coakley has carried out a long dialogical exercise around issues related to the body in Christian thought, allowing systematic theology to both challenge and learn from feminist theory. The point at which the two meet is in the gendered Christian body, and more specifically in the shared terminology of desire. The prevailing cultural sentiment assumes that “physiological desires and urges are basic and fundamental,”¹¹² that existential notions of desire are a kind of metaphor built from the blocks of desire as a physical experience. Theology contests this notion, first by suggesting that “‘desire’ is *really* about desire for God”¹¹³ and that consequently “it is God who is basic, and ‘desire’ the precious clue that ever tugs at the heart, reminding the human soul—however dimly—of its created source.”¹¹⁴ Christian theology thus provokes “with a deeper, and more primary, question: that of putting desire for God above all other desires, and with judging human desires only in that light.”¹¹⁵ At the same time, the primacy of the soul's longing for God reorients theology's focus with respect to its own resources.

The resource within Christian life where desire both flourishes and finds its origin is the tradition of contemplative prayer and the associated phenomena of mysticism, monasticism, and asceticism. Significantly, then, the embodied relation to God which the contemplative pursues plays a role in Coakley's “*théologie totale*” not dissimilar to the role that discipleship plays in this thesis.¹¹⁶ Christian contemplation, in Coakley's reading, carries within it the two-fold

¹¹² Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self: An Essay 'On the Trinity,'* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2013), 7.

¹¹³ Coakley, *God, Sexuality*, 9.

¹¹⁴ Coakley, *God, Sexuality*, 10.

¹¹⁵ Coakley, *God, Sexuality*, 11.

¹¹⁶ Coakley, *God, Sexuality*, 66. The methodology of a *théologie totale* is deeply significant for Coakley's work, dating back to her first book, based on her dissertation, in which she proposed the notion of a “*christologie totale*” as a productive extension of the insights of Ernst Troeltsch (Sarah Coakley, *Christ Without Absolutes: A Study of the Christology of Ernst Troeltsch* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 194). As Coakley has approached the task of writing a systematic theology, she has defined a *théologie totale* in greater detail (see Coakley, *God, Sexuality*, 88ff.) but suffice to say for the moment that its core still resides in her original proposal for a theology that “would arise out of a productive convergence between the reporting and analysis of popular piety on the one hand, and the more traditional exposition of historical documents on the other” (Coakley, *Without Absolutes*, 194).

movement of the Kierkegaardian dialectic, it opens oneself up to the direct encounter with God which is also an undoing of the self. “The practice of contemplation,” she writes, “sustains the systematic theological enterprise, not because it is a manmade ‘foundation’ for it, but because it is the primary ascetical submission to the divine demanded by revelation, and the link the creative source of life to which it continually returns.”¹¹⁷ The approach of God—the perfect ‘other’—to the contemplative requires an acknowledgment of the inaccessibility of our desire’s object, even as this acknowledgement is the path along which desire is finally fulfilled. “By choosing to ‘make space’ in this way,” Coakley writes, “one ‘practises’ the ‘presence of God’—the subtle but enabling presence of a God who neither shouts nor forces, let alone ‘obliterates’.”¹¹⁸ It is the gentle elusiveness of God’s presence which is the entire point, for the contemplative. It communicates, at moments, both consolation and desolation, and thus contains within it the mysterious partnership of ecstasy and utter abandonment.

Without entirely differentiating these two terms—ecstasy and abandonment—it is perhaps helpful to understand each as its own respective word of caution to different audiences. To the one who is eager to speak about theories of embodiment, contemplative darkness is a reminder about the depth and significance of otherness, a caution not to assume too quickly that reassertion of authority over one’s body is a gateway to knowledge. Rather than undermining an embodied form of knowing, the self-abnegating disciplines of the Christian contemplative are an attempt to more properly situate the body with respect to its own desires. They are the movement in which we are permitted to rightly see physical longing—as Coakley writes with respect to sexual desire, for example—as “the ‘precious clue’ woven into our created being reminding us of our rootedness in God, to bring this desire into *right* ‘alignment’ with God’s purposes, purified from sin and possessiveness.”¹¹⁹ Coakley thus writes thoughtfully but provocatively about a variety of Christian claims which arise out of contemplative asceticism—each commonly assumed to be a ‘denial’ of the body—which can in fact properly situate a fully-embodied, feminist theology. She calls “sacrifice . . . as much a *feminist* mode of transformation as it is a death knell to patriarchy.”¹²⁰ In a properly christological notion of *kenosis* she finds a “‘power-in-vulnerability’, the willed effacement to a gentle omnipotence which, far from

¹¹⁷ Coakley, *God, Sexuality*, 88.

¹¹⁸ Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 35.

¹¹⁹ Coakley, *God, Sexuality*, 309-10, emphasis in original.

¹²⁰ Sarah Coakley, “In Defense of Sacrifice: Gender, Selfhood, and the Binding of Isaac,” in *Feminism, Sexuality, and the Return of Religion*, eds. Linda Martín Alcoff and John D. Caputo (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 2011): 17-38, on 31.

‘complementing’ masculinity, acts as its undoing.”¹²¹ In praying along with the trinitarian language of “Father,” she insists that the feminist not only can use such language, but “above all, *must*; for it lies with her alone to do the kneeling work that ultimately slays patriarchy at its root.”¹²² In all of these movements we find Coakley engaged in an immensely useful exercise. Across her work, she is considering the ways in which the activity of a disciple’s life with God births a language which coincides with a liberating work for actual bodies precisely because our pre-conceptions about the use of our bodies—untested against any ‘other’—are slain.

At the same time as contemplative abandonment provides a word of caution to the theorist of embodiment, contemplative ecstasy provides a word of caution to the theologian operating entirely in the abstract and analytical. The more ‘positive’ function of contemplation is to draw theology more fully into a trinitarian language by pointing it more concretely at that oft-neglected Third Person, the Holy Spirit. Coakley reads the history of 4th-century conciliar definitions of the trinity as containing “the potential, at least, to an ironic *unorthodoxy*—in the form of the temptation to re-relegate the Spirit to an effective remaining subordination.”¹²³ This temptation coincides with a political motivation, to suppress not only heterogeneity but the potential impact of the feminine on the development of church doctrine. Coakley argues that one way of “ordering” a doctrine of God since the earliest days of the church has been to invest it with a kind of descending revelational authority, in which, ultimately, the Spirit becomes “the secondary communicator of an already privileged dyad of Father and Son.”¹²⁴ A “‘linear’ and hierarchical perception of the divine persons”¹²⁵ then corresponds to a rigid ecclesiology in which the Spirit—and thus the mystical, creative, subversive, or ecstatic elements of Christian faith available to all believers—is kept firmly under control. The Montanist manifestations of spiritual ecstasy are too often perceived by theologians—in words Coakley quotes from Eusebius’ *Ecclesiastical History*—as an “involuntary madness of soul.”¹²⁶ Coakley thus rightly draws a link between the notion of the primacy of divine desire, the mystical encounter with the Holy Spirit, and disruptive ecclesial paradigms. An unbridled desire for God is potentially threatening to the keepers of polity, and an overly-positive notion of personal revelation poten-

¹²¹ Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, 37.

¹²² Coakley, *God, Sexuality*, 327.

¹²³ Coakley, *God, Sexuality*, 101.

¹²⁴ Coakley, *God, Sexuality*, 101.

¹²⁵ Coakley, *God, Sexuality*, 117.

¹²⁶ Coakley, *God, Sexuality*, 121.

tially threatening to doctrinal inflexibility. To keep the Holy Spirit—and the associated contemplative practices—safely to one side is also to subordinate Christian embodiment to Christian cerebralism.

5.6.2 *The Spirit and Methodology*

In order to reclaim the Spirit's place within trinitarian theological language, Coakley's preference—in keeping with the Troeltschian influence on her work—is to closely examine the practices of Christians as they interact with and worship the Spirit. From this examination, she then derives a shared language of experience from which new theological insights can be made. At times, this examination takes the form of a careful reflection on liturgical detail, including reflection from the experience of embodying the priestly office, as Coakley herself does.¹²⁷ At other times it takes the form of a more sociological survey of practices according to ethnographic methods, such as her “fieldwork on charismatics” at an Anglican parish in the north of England.¹²⁸

It's in this methodological aspect of her work where Coakley's theology of contemplation finds its limit. She admits to “a very elusive balancing act in this type of trinitarianism that prioritizes the Spirit in prayer.”¹²⁹ On the one hand, she is wary of “a covert subordinationism” appearing “under the *guise of homoousion* orthodoxy” which leaves “the Spirit more safely tamed and regulated by a dominant emphasis on Father and Son, with a creeping, but enervating, loss of the vibrancy of prayer.”¹³⁰ On the other hand, she has no more desire than the patristic theologians to admit as Christian any use of the Spirit which is potentially schismatic. This represents the opposite imbalance from the hierarchical tendency, a temptation towards “a charismatic dissolution of the doctrine of the Trinity” which “may appear subversive of existing church order.”¹³¹ By principally turning her sociological eye towards the high church or contemplative strains of liturgical or spiritual experience, she immediately limits her results to return a language of the Spirit more or less conducive to institutional Anglicanism, even as it might creatively re-appropriate the tradition. And so, for instance, her fieldwork on a charismatic revival

¹²⁷ See, for example, her chapter on “The Woman at the Altar” in Sarah Coakley, *The New Asceticism: Sexuality, Gender, and the Quest for God* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

¹²⁸ Coakley, *God, Sexuality*, 163.

¹²⁹ Coakley, *God, Sexuality*, 153.

¹³⁰ Coakley, *God, Sexuality*, 153.

¹³¹ Coakley, *God, Sexuality*, 153.

within one Anglican parish finds the congregation “initially attracted to a sectlike pneumatology,” but, rather conveniently, “over time . . . a nudging towards reflective trinitarianism was evidenced. Quieter worship, a greater respect for ‘tradition’, and some dawning recognition of the convergence between charismatic and contemplative spiritualities, were significant accompaniments here.”¹³²

One cannot help but wonder about the impact on a *théologie totale* if Coakley were to do her fieldwork in an African neo-Pentecostal church, shepherded by an untrained and self-appointed archbishop. She might well challenge the theological basis of such a congregation, questioning whether the unconditional proclamation of the Spirit’s presence shouldn’t be tempered with the contemplative’s awareness “of the possibility of genuinely Christlike dereliction.”¹³³ Such a response, while theologically defensible, only highlights the methodological problem. The more her Troeltschian ethnographic approach is brought to bear on substantially different church contexts, the more unsteady Coakley’s trinitarian balance grows. By limiting worship and prayer to the Spirit’s function—as, ostensibly, the one presently ‘active’ person of the trinity—Coakley is perhaps guilty of her own slightly deficient doctrine of God. But by limiting God’s present work to the Spirit, limiting the Spirit’s mode of appearing to the congregation’s own terminology of the Spirit’s presence, and limiting even this terminology to those manifestations which lead the Christian back into the fold of magisterial theology, Coakley permits the Spirit to be disruptive of order, but only within very safe and sturdy confines. This combination tends to undercut the force of her own insights. While Coakley acknowledges the tension—that a strong emphasis on the immediacy of the Spirit has historically led to a great deal of fragmentation—her methodology allows her to deftly elide any final answers about the precariousness of being both catholic and charismatic.

Nonetheless, with respect to the question of the present chapter, we have in Coakley’s theology a deeply trenchant analysis of the Christian disciple’s approach to the body. What her emphasis on contemplative prayer does exceptionally well is to effectively challenge the notion that we know of what we speak when we talk about desires. Debates about who should rightfully exert authority over the body recede to the background as we question whether we understand what ‘authority’ means in this context. The body is not a domain, and it is certainly not our domain.

¹³² Coakley, *God, Sexuality*, 181.

¹³³ Coakley, *God, Sexuality*, 179.

To assume that the body is the domain of human authority has led at times to an unhealthy theological Manichaeism, assuming that the body must be either rejected entirely or invaded from some purer realm of the spirit. Conversely, it has equally led to an unhelpful counter-Christian ideology—insofar as theology is taken to oppose embodiment—which strains to ‘re-assert’ personal dominion over something which could never really be dominated in the first place. What Coakley’s theology does well is to suggest that there is a mode of living in relation to God from which a fully-embodied theological language could emerge. This mode of living does not first require an entirely different way of re-conceiving the body. It simply requires making use of the body, entering into the posture of prayer, worship, and receptivity, expecting that this posture will entail the paradox of desire unfulfilled and restored, the loss of *sarx* in order to more fully embrace *sōma*.

5.7 A Final Word on Clement: Discipleship and *idruō*

As a conclusion to this chapter, let us allow Sarah Coakley’s work to prod us towards a fuller practical understanding of the theological language of *pneuma* and *sarx* after discipleship. The critique of Coakley’s methodology is not intended to dismiss contemplative prayer as a context for understanding a Christian life in the body. It is rather to suggest that her particular way of re-invigorating trinitarian language by re-emphasizing the Spirit, combined with her intention to locate the Spirit’s work only in ecclesial practices which explicitly acknowledge the Spirit, is unnecessarily limiting. A different approach might allow prayer to serve as the synecdoche that it properly is—one vital aspect in a life of discipleship which looks to holistic obedience for the subtle dialectic of divine presence and human submission to which Coakley attests. It is in this respect both that prayer fills the whole of the disciple’s life and simultaneously the whole of the disciple’s life become a kind of prayer. In the words of Clement of Alexandria, the disciple “will pray . . . while engaged in walking, in conversation, while in silence . . . If he but form the thought in the secret chamber of his soul, and call on the Father ‘with unspoken groanings,’ He is near, and is at his side, while yet speaking.”¹³⁴

We return to Clement for one final insight to more concretely alter our understanding of theological language once discipleship serves as prolegomena. In a short but dense passage of the *Stromata*, Clement uses variations of the Greek word *idruō*—to seat or establish something—

¹³⁴ Clement, “Stromata,” 1141.

to argue that everything which exists is “localized,” or inversely, “whatever does not exist is not localized.”¹³⁵ This is no less true for God, which is not to place a limitation on divine omnipresence, but speaks to the particularity of God’s intention. The mistake, in even making this suggestion, is to think that the human task is therefore to localize notions and language of God. To the contrary, for Clement, to suggest that humans can localize God is to say that God “was once not localized, and did not exist at all.”¹³⁶ In other words, the disciple who believes her obedience brings God to bear on the present is serving a non-existent God, one who was not already present, and therefore one who was not at all. The disciple’s task is rather to be localized by God. In the life of the true Christian, “here also we shall find that which is localized,” and in the life of one pursuing Christ, “that which is being localized.”¹³⁷ To be localized also means to find oneself, knowingly or unknowingly, caught up in “the divine likeness and the holy image,”¹³⁸ which is equally to say, the life of Christ.

To end on a more constructive proposal is to say that theology would be best served by taking Clement’s notion of “localization” as literally as possible. Anyone wanting to obey will have to acknowledge themselves placed in this body, in this physical space, with these limitations. The concrete, tangible, physical scope of the disciple’s life is also the space in which the disciple is graciously deprived of *sarx*, in which the disciple is called to take up the simple decisions of self-denial and expressive love. This is a preliminary reminder at a moment when we are all too easily distracted by the seemingly unbounded reach of our media consumption, by participation in debates that are largely virtual, joining sides that are, within the parameters of our physical community, entirely hypothetical. The call to obedience localizes one in the place where one is a body. This is less a criticism of technology or the internet than a caution that the disciple never ceases to be a *sōma*, and must enter even into online spaces as a whole person speaking to other whole persons. There can be no substitute for a holistic view of the self and a holistic view of the other, and we should at least admit the possibility that virtual communication occasionally diminishes this holism.

It is, however, entirely possible to see a person before our very eyes as something less than *sōma*, and to see an argument as something other than the puzzle of two bodies attempting to

¹³⁵ Clement, “Stromata,” 1128.

¹³⁶ Clement, “Stromata,” 1128.

¹³⁷ Clement, “Stromata,” 1129.

¹³⁸ Clement, “Stromata,” 1129.

occupy a physical place together, negotiating the reality of chance encounter, loaded glance, pregnant silence. It is such encounters as are found in the very smallness of fumbling about in a shared space where the universal-particular begins to call to us, asks to undo our *sarx*. It is in the very unique localism of a neighborly dispute, a colloquial misunderstanding, an injustice witnessed across the street, where the opportunity to obey beckons us most resolutely. Theology after discipleship must understand this localization as the building blocks of its very language. It is far too easy for the modern theologian to live inside the world of interesting ideas, and to understand the particulars of what happens in a local space as merely the drama of their ideas playing itself out. What is immensely difficult is to take the particularity of daily living as the origin of an idea. But theology after discipleship understands itself as localized, as the speech that arises from negotiating physical life, and it ought to take this challenge in the most literal sense. As Clement reminds us, “The adversary is not the body, as some would have it, but the devil,” and it is entirely possible that some “confess themselves to belong to Christ, but find themselves in the midst of the devil’s works.”¹³⁹ Discipleship takes the rejection of the devil, in one’s bodily life, to be more fundamental to theology than confessing oneself as belonging to Christ.

5.8 Conclusion

The Christian notion of discipleship supplies to theology a basis for thinking about the body as truly being at the center of its own thought. In order to do this, however, a great demand is placed on Christian thought. No longer can theology consider its ability to conceptualise either God or world as the grounds from which it speaks. It cannot impose upon the body an expectation that the body will conform to whatever arises from this conceptuality. Instead, discipleship already finds itself as an action which pursues the work of God with the human body as it now exists. It is this work out of which theology can rise, and can then consider itself to be truly embodied. Discipleship thus excludes ideology from the process of forming a theology of the body by denying primacy to ideation in the first place, by resisting the notion that what must be settled in order to have a theology of the body is an account of the body’s origin or *telos*.

¹³⁹ Clement, “Stromata,” 900.

As we move towards the conclusion of this thesis, this last claim openly exposes more questions which future research would have to explore in order to develop an account of theology after discipleship. Where does this account stand with respect to the traditional claims and uses of theology, and where does it direct us from here? In closing, chapter six will briefly consider a few possible implications worth exploring.

Chapter 6

Discipleship in Future Theological Conversations

6.1 Summary of the Research

In chapter one, we established that this thesis would take up the question of how theology ought to understand the relation of theory and praxis. Two broad approaches to understanding the relation of theory and praxis were introduced. For the traditional ‘theologian’, theory is theology’s internal process of working out its beliefs and confessions about God. From the conceptions of God and world constructed by the traditional theologian, a set of principles can be deduced that govern how Christian life ought to be lived in faithfulness to God. For the ‘radical’ theologian, while the general thrust of God’s self-giving love establishes the church’s obligation to be for the world, the particulars of what this ‘for-ness’ entails are to be located in praxis. Locating the particulars in praxis means using the best practices of a variety of historical, economic, and social scientific methods for establishing the situation ‘on the ground,’ the reality to which Christian life is addressing itself. Other disciplines will tell us what is wrong and how it can be fixed; the task of theology is—in the extreme case—to reconfigure its self-understanding according to this new information or—in a more moderate case—to find within its own traditions the means for supporting and encouraging the praxis which these disciplines recommend.

What both the traditional and the radical theologian share, then, is a two-fold presumption. The first presumption is in favor of an anthropology in which thought always precedes action, in which action is taken to be the result or application of a particular conceptual framework to the world. In this respect, neither the traditional nor the radical theologian are prepared for praxis to truly be normative in theological thought, because both lack an anthropology in which that possibility could even be sensibly proposed. Both agree that praxis is always informed by some

theory, they merely disagree over where the theories which govern Christian action ought to be derived. What both lack, then, is a proper way of accounting for the inverse, that all theorising is itself already a praxis. At this point, it is our basic anthropological account which begins to break down. Every action coincides with an intellectual posture in the moment of that action, and this posture is as much a part of the action as it is a construct of all the intellectual postures which preceded it. And those intellectual postures were, as well, actions. It becomes impossible to separate out a field of theory from the field of human activity, within which the business of constructing theories is merely one action among many.

In response to this problem, this thesis proposed a primary research question: *are there resources in the Christian tradition for the possibility that the disruptive force of God's revelation emerges in the medium of praxis rather than cognition?* This thesis has set out to investigate Christian discipleship as the form of God's revelation which both discloses and speaks to precisely the problem at hand. The life of the God-human, Jesus Christ, is the place where supposedly autonomous definitions of divinity and humanity are found to have their common origin. The history of Christ thus sets a course of action—still ongoing in the life of the resurrected Christ—which creates a kind of space into which the disciple is called to step. It is only because of revelation's agential motion that revelation could then be said to create a kind of space, a silhouette hanging in its wake, an afterimage of a form no longer seen. But even this claim is at risk of confusing us if we imagine the world as itself a space through which Christ walks. Instead the activity of the God-human is the world in its true form, the world as it exists on its trajectory toward reconciliation with its Creator, the biblical space of the kingdom or reign of God.

Four secondary objectives were laid out in chapter one, and it is useful now to consider how those secondary objectives have been addressed in pursuing the primary objective. The first objective was to consider in what way the notion of discipleship confronts and undermines the totalising discourses of ideology. Pascal's *Pensées* gave us a preliminary sense in which discipleship engages us at the level of *coutume*, in the particularity of daily existence in which our beliefs and commitments are properly manifest. Discipleship brings us into an account of human reason by convincing us indirectly, through the process of knowing upon which knowledge is built. In so doing, discipleship also compels us to admit that our attempts at knowledge on the basis of some other supposed foundation—sense perception, sentential logic, etc.—are half-hearted, prone to illusion, and provisional at best. The problem is not with their

particular foundations, but with the claim that reason can be founded upon a mere idea, apart from the life in which it is lived. Moreover, as we see in Pascal's *Lettres provinciales*, this critique is not limited to so-called secular ideas. Religious ideas—even ideas approved by the magisterium—are no less subject to the varieties of problems, biases, and agendas which afflict all ideation. Pascal thus gives us a sense in which ideology is not the problem of a particular way of thinking, it is a problem with thought generally, and so the organising principles of Christian thought is no mere idea, but a holistic expression of life lived in relation to God.

The second objective was to consider the relation of a theology which follows after discipleship to a traditional understanding of theology's role in relation to Christian praxis. The Kierkegaardian version of dialectical movement helps to frame this relation not so much as a difference in content as a difference in form. As opposed to the static positivism with which knowledge is made available in most theological constructs, Kierkegaard understands discipleship as the movement of the hypostatically united absolute and particular towards the human disciple. In the process, it is conceptuality which is undermined, but nonetheless truth that is ever more effectively disclosed. This truth, however, is the undoing of the self, the participation in the life of Christ which is the loss of assurance. The movement in which discipleship places us is a grounds for knowledge, but only by challenging every prior expectation we have had for what it means to know something. We know ourselves united to Christ precisely as obedience leads us towards unknowing and uncertainty, just as Christ's obedience led to the cross. Discipleship thus critiques traditional theology not at the level of doctrines and confessions, but at the level of the basis to which our confidence appeals.

The third objective was to consider whether there might still be room in a theology after discipleship to speak intelligibly about the 'knowledge of God' or 'the word of God' without opening up the potential to make such notions susceptible to ideology all over again. Kierkegaard's relentless negation of the human self left little room for a more positive appropriation of reason after discipleship. But Bonhoeffer's christology provided an account of the availability of *Christus praesens* which might include both the present experience of knowing, as well as the experience of seeking knowledge in the midst of uncertainty. On the one hand, Bonhoeffer's notion of discipleship responded to the positive disciplines of Finkenwalde, holding out hope that an understanding of present conformity to Christ might be found in Christian community.

But Bonhoeffer's notion of discipleship also included an awareness of the Kierkegaardian negation, and so his experience of continuing to seek the present Christ in the midst of 'not knowing what must be done' gave us guideposts for the disciple to reflect upon.

The fourth objective was to apply the implications of a theology after discipleship to the test case of the issues and challenges surrounding the language of embodiment. Embodiment is a useful consideration because it is a topic that is both currently up for discussion and which appears immediately relevant to theology after discipleship. The union of absolute and particular in the God-human gives substance to the Christian notion that the body's proper use is in its obedient relation to God. But rather than permitting this to turn into merely another legalistic, ideological claim to certainty about the body's teleological purpose, discipleship starts with the assumption that God's calling is precisely for our bodies as they currently exist. As such, discipleship finds a kindred spirit in Marx's accusation against the Young Hegelians of offering nothing but phrases to oppose the phrases of hegemonic power. Discipleship thus entails the claim that theology ought to properly arise from a participation in Christ's liberative work, without necessarily assuming—as both some critical theorists and some liberation theologians do—that we necessarily know in advance what this liberation will entail.

6.2 Discipleship and Theology Beyond Ideology

The four secondary objectives of this thesis have been steps along the way towards achieving the central objective, which was described in section 1.4 as the attempt to form an account of a theological method which contains in its own self-definition the resources for resisting the manipulating influences of ideology. Ideology, in one sense, is broadly categorical. It merely describes any system of thought by which meaning is created. It turns sinister when it is manipulated, harnessed to the agenda of the powerful for the purposes of oppression, or when it enforces conformity to a set of traditions or customs entirely divorced from the concrete needs of the people. Used in this sense, it is tempting to clarify that perhaps this thesis is not opposed to ideology, but to 'bad' ideologies, to ideologies that become warped or misused.

The inverse of this assumption is the implication that there is such a thing as a 'good' ideology. Historically, among critics of ideology, there has been little agreement on this point. Marx and

Engels seemed to hope that historical materialism could, in a sense, provide a positive ideological ground on which a worldview could be constructed leading to the subversion and overthrow. At its most optimistic, this hope led to varieties of Leninist vanguardism, in which a party of elite intellectuals could systematically disabuse the masses of the ideological fantasies imposed upon them by the ruling classes, replacing a bad ideology with a good one, a self-aware class consciousness. Watching uncomfortably as the grim implications of this optimism were realised in Soviet re-education initiatives,¹ a more moderate brand of thought associated with thinkers like Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno turned the focus from the specifics of ‘good’ ideology and towards the perpetual critique of ‘bad’ ideologies.² For many descendants of critical theory, criticism is its own reason. By implication, the possibility of a good ideology continues to exist, but the particulars of this ideology are often hazy, the assumption being that something like a good ideology can only be properly spoken of after hegemonic paradigms of thought are torn down and the oppressed are given space to theorise for themselves. The possibility of a good ideology still exists, although it is less the precursor to revolution than one of revolution’s effects.

Alongside of these two streams of thought, there is a third stream—or at least the hint of a third stream—more pessimistic about the possibilities of a ‘good’ ideology. The indirect progenitor of this stream is Martin Heidegger, and it is perhaps most clearly manifest in Herbert Marcuse’s lifelong engagement with Heidegger (albeit an engagement that ended in “disillusionment,” not least because of Heidegger’s eventual support for National Socialism).³ Under the influence of a Heideggerian phenomenology, the very structure of ideology and its indebtedness to onto-theology became itself a problem to be reckoned with.

While this is an overly broad characterization of the 20th-century state of affairs among Marxist critics of ideology, it does explain some of the confusion in the use of the word ‘ideology’. In section 1.2, we briefly mentioned Raymond Williams’ survey of the uses of ideology in Marxist literature. At times, the word denoted something quite general, at other times something quite

¹ Sociologist Paul Froese has written a fascinating account of the full extent of Stalin’s attempt in the 1930’s to construct an alternative, quasi-religious, ‘good’ ideology around which Soviet society could be organised. See Paul Froese, *The Plot to Kill God: Findings from the Soviet Experiment in Secularization* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008).

² For more, see Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research 1923-1950* (London: Heinemann, 1973).

³ For a selection of Marcuse’s writing on the matter, see Herbert Marcuse, *Heideggerian Marxism*, eds. Richard Wolin and John Abromeit (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005).

specific—at times it means mere belief, at other times ‘illusory beliefs’. This discrepancy is the current confusion writ small. Is ideology bad only when it has been hijacked, or is there something endemic to ideology which renders it frequently—even inevitably—prone to kidnapping? Is ideology in the broadest sense able to be anything other than illusory? Is bad ideology the problem, or is ideology the problem?

This thesis has taken what might seem to be an extreme position, which is that ideology in the broadest sense is the problem to be addressed. The position here is that this problem is both insisted upon and resolved by Christian discipleship. This thesis is not attempting to advance a conversation within leftist political thought, but to advance a conversation within theology. Within the South African context, however—and within the broader conversations of liberation and contextual theologies which have been significant in South Africa—it is the echo of political conversations which has brought the relation of theory and praxis to our attention. But the task of this thesis is not to propose implications for politics, but to propose implications for theologians and churches, to consider the shape of a theological language which takes seriously the common origin of Christian theory and praxis in the discipleship of Christ.

As such, the shared suggestion of Pascal, Kierkegaard, and Bonhoeffer is that the way Christ follows—which becomes the way we are called to follow—serves as the starting point for theological language. The disciple of Christ does not know with certainty, on the basis of any pre-existing conception, what it means to participate in the life of Christ or how this might be accomplished. All that is given is the call to follow Christ. In pursuit of this path, the disciple may take up the activities of the historical Jesus—to pray, to show compassion, to reject power, to chastise hypocrisy, to surrender to self, to proclaim scripture, to seek solitude, to be baptised, to gather companions, to heal the sick, to transgress cultural divides, all as Christ does. But taking up this activity is not an end unto itself, but a beginning through which the disciple hopes to draw closer to the present activity of Christ, to attain to a state of relating to God which could be described as knowledge.

The concern of both the traditional and the radical theologian is that theology might allow itself to be co-opted by some ideological agenda serving interests other than God’s. This concern is well-founded, and it is a sign of the confusion in our assumptions that the traditional and the radical theologian would principally direct this accusation against one another. This problem of ideology will not be solved by attempting to more rigorously defend the boundaries of first

principles. Ideology can only be subverted by the divine transcendent, by the truth which stands outside of mere ideation. The presence of this divine transcendent in the God-human's activity should not be understood as merely a new first principle, the absolute guarantor of theology's faithfulness. Instead, the presence of divine transcendence is what casts us in the first place into the restless quest of foundationalism, and then into the despairing triage that is postfoundationalism. Discipleship thus serves as the response to the divine presence, as a life lived with the hope of having one's own knowledge subverted. Only after this awareness of divine subversion is it possible to speak of something like knowledge. As such, this thesis has been an inquiry into discipleship not as the grounds for knowledge, *per se*, but as the unconditioned *a priori* which gives rise to Christian life as it stands.

While this thesis is making an argument about the nature of theology, it is inevitable that this discussion will have implications for a broader epistemology. Future research would need to engage with the history of Lutheran critiques of human reason leading up to Heidegger, admitting that discipleship may be concerned with precisely the same critique of onto-theology that Heidegger carried out, albeit for different reasons and to quite different ends.

In this last chapter, however, the more immediately pressing concern—insofar as this thesis endeavours to speak about *theological language* after discipleship—is to consider the implications for further research on where the christocentric bias of discipleship as the location of God's disclosure leaves us with respect to fundamental debates within traditional theology. The next two sections will propose lines along which this thesis' argument can be extended by borrowing Bonhoeffer's terminology of being and act. If discipleship is the space in which God the act-being of God is disclosed, where might this take theological thought from here? Tentatively, the suggestion is that discipleship might coincide simultaneously with a kind of Protestant critique of Catholic/Orthodox thought, and a Catholic critique of Protestant thought. Those critiques are limited to quite specific, technical debates within each line of thought, which will be briefly considered in the next two sections.

6.3 The Act of Discipleship as the Act of Christ

One of the implications of discipleship's christological emphasis—found particularly in Bonhoeffer and Kierkegaard—is that it places the past and present acts of Christ's obedience at the

centre of both theology and knowledge more broadly. This implication, then, necessarily brings us into conversation with the legacy of Karl Barth—appropriately so, insofar as Kierkegaard’s ‘infinite qualitative difference’ influenced Barth⁴ and Barth in turn influenced Bonhoeffer.⁵ At the same time, the pietistic reverberations in Kierkegaard’s and Bonhoeffer’s works lend them a certain willingness to speak about divine revelation in spatial, human terms—either existentially or ethically—which Barth might seem to oppose. Thus, a future conversation between discipleship and the legacy of Barth needs to clarify the details of this relation between theology after discipleship and Barth’s work. This section will offer a preliminary sketch of where such an inquiry might lead. The relevant core of Barth’s legacy which needs to be addressed is the ongoing discussion about the implications of portraying “the being of God in act.”⁶ In order to clarify where discipleship stands with respect to a Barthian ontology, we must begin with a closer consideration of what is meant by the ‘act’ in Barth’s claim.

Ever since Jüngel’s *Gottes Sein ist im Werden* noted that—without making use of a “general notion of being”—“Barth’s dogmatics makes ontological claims throughout,”⁷ interpreters have been attempting to explain the nature of these claims. Barth’s ontology is often referred to as “actualistic” in that it privileges “the event of the revelation of God” which is the person of Jesus Christ.⁸ George Hunsinger has defined the “motif” of actualism more broadly in Barth’s work as simply a description of how Barth “thinks primarily in terms of events and relationships rather than monadic or self-contained substances.”⁹ Applied to ontology, actualism speaks to Barth’s “refusal to open up a metaphysical gap between the divine essence on the one hand and God’s decision to be God in a redemptive relation with sinful humanity.”¹⁰

⁴ Philip Ziegler, “Barth’s Criticisms of Kierkegaard—A Striking out at Phantoms?” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 9.4 (2007): 434-451.

⁵ For more on the relationship between Barth’s thought and Bonhoeffer’s, see Charles Marsh’s aforementioned book *Reclaiming Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, as well as Andreas Pangritz, *Karl Barth in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, trans. Barbara Rumscheidt and Martin Rumscheidt (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000). My own assessment of Bonhoeffer’s contrast with Barth is forthcoming in 2018 as “Beginning Again at the Beginning: Barth and Bonhoeffer on the Nature of Revelation,” to be published in the proceedings of 12th International Bonhoeffer Congress.

⁶ Karl Barth, *The Church Dogmatics, Volume II/1*, eds. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance, trans. T.H.L. Parker, W.B. Johnston, H. Knight, and J.L.M. Haire (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), 257.

⁷ Eberhard Jüngel, *Gottes Sein ist im Werden*, 3rd ed. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1975, originally published 1966), 75.

⁸ Paul T. Nimmo, *Being in Action: The Theological Shape of Barth’s Ethical Vision* (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 6.

⁹ George Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of His Theology* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991), 30.

¹⁰ Bruce McCormack, “Election and the Trinity: Theses in Response to George Hunsinger,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 63.2 (2010): 203-224, on 210.

That which God does—which is also to say, what God has done for the redemption of creation—is also how and what God is. An actualistic ontology suggests that there is no static being hovering in the aether which then produces action, but that God’s redemptive action is also God’s self-disclosure precisely because there is no other being behind the eternally electing and saving God. This claim deserves a closer look, because the future of this line of inquiry hinges not on whether Barth conceives of God’s being in act, but on what precisely is contained in the notion of free decision which provides background to this claim.

“God’s revelation is a particular event,” Barth writes, “not identical with the sum, nor identical with any of the content of other existing happenings either in nature or in human history.”¹¹ Let this serve as a starting point for Barth’s understanding of act, as it captures both the act and the purity of the *actus purus*. The act of God’s self-disclosure has no precedent, it makes no reference to any established ground or concept, it does not “derive from any other source or look back to any other starting-point.”¹² As such, it appears as a happening, an event—not an orchestral crescendo leading up to the drawing back of a curtain, but a sudden encounter which catches the recipient entirely unawares. It is in this way an action, but also a pure action, an action which can only be permitted to define itself on its own terms, since it originates in nothing else but itself.

What is this discrete act of God? The paradigm in which this description of pure action makes the most sense is to take speech as a representative example. It is a certainly a guiding metaphor for Barth’s early work—the famous “*deus dixit*”¹³ of the *Göttingen Dogmatics* entails the claim that “the presupposition of the Bible is not that God is but that he spoke” and therefore “we are directed, not to God in himself, but to God communicating himself.”¹⁴ God is always free to speak, and this speaking does not necessarily require a prior existing vocabulary. As speech, it is not—at least not without qualification—equivalent to the presence of the speaker. It is more definitionally Word than any other words. It contains content, though an alien content which must supply the grammar and syntax of its own interpretation.

¹¹ Barth, *CD II/1*, 264.

¹² Karl Barth, *The Church Dogmatics, Volume II/2*, eds. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance, trans. G.W. Bromiley, J.C. Campbell, I. Wilson, J.S. McNab, H. Knight, and R.A. Stewart (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), 94.

¹³ Karl Barth, *The Göttingen Dogmatics: Instruction in the Christian Religion, Volume One*, ed. Hannelotte Reif-fen, trans. G.W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 45.

¹⁴ Barth, *Göttingen Dogmatics*, 58.

Of course, in the Christian confession, this Word is nothing other than “*Jesus Christus unser Herr*” which is “*die Heilsbotschaft . . . der Sinn der Geschichte.*”¹⁵ What does this mean, however, to speak about Jesus Christ and the act of God at once? For the early Barth of the Romans commentary, God’s act of self-disclosure in Christ immediately called to mind the events of crucifixion and resurrection, and together these served to maintain the unique self-definability of Christ. The cross is the “*göttlichen Nein,*”¹⁶ the death of human reason, “the source of the night in which we wander, the source of the wrath of God revealed to us.”¹⁷ The resurrection is no easier to comprehend, however, it is also a “*Krisis vom Tode zum Leben*”¹⁸ in which we are presented with the paradox of life after death, but also given “opportunity to recognize ourselves in God”¹⁹ and thus be confronted by the paradox of our own inclusion in this death and life. Crucifixion and resurrection thus serve as the events in which we might say that the ‘event-ness’ of Christ is disclosed. For the early Barth, then, we are invited to find a notion of pure act in the purity of Christ’s particular acts, of which the cross and the empty tomb uniquely are the ciphers to what would otherwise be unknowable.

By the first volume of the *Church Dogmatics*, however, Barth’s thinking had already begun to unpack a broader array of meaning in the revelatory content of Christ’s history, beyond just the crisis into which cross and resurrection might throw us. This fuller portrait of Christ’s work as containing not just a No and a Yes, but an entire language on which dogmatics could be built corresponded to a shift in the notion of ‘act’ at the heart of Barth’s ‘actualism.’ During this time, the act in its purest form corresponded more generally to divine self-disclosure, which is Christ, but which is also divine truth as a whole presently approaching humanity through a variety of media. The divine Word imparted in the revelation of God finds its media in “the coming Jesus Christ and finally, when the time was fulfilled, the Jesus Christ who has come,”²⁰ the proclamation of “God’s positive command,”²¹ and—each attesting to and attested to by—“the externality of the concrete Canon.”²² Here, the act of God’s self-disclosure is Christ, and yet Barth also wrestles with the possibility that Christ might attest to a more general divine act.

¹⁵ Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922* (Zollikon-Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1940), 5.

¹⁶ Barth, *Römerbrief*, 14.

¹⁷ Barth, *Römerbrief*, 24.

¹⁸ Barth, *Römerbrief*, 207.

¹⁹ Barth, *Römerbrief*, 176.

²⁰ Barth, *CD I/1*, 113.

²¹ Barth, *CD I/1*, 90.

²² Barth, *CD I/1*, 101.

The characteristics of this divine act are defined by the coming of Christ, in a sense, but nonetheless find resonances in other acts, e.g. the spoken word proclaimed from the pulpit or the written word becoming God's Word for the faithful reader.

Slowly, the linguistic metaphor of Word begins to overpower the specificity of Christ. No longer are we talking about Christ's acts dictating the meaning of actualism, but we are talking about Christ *as* act, a claim which is decidedly non-intuitive. The basic divine act which supplies our definition begins to retreat farther away from anything resembling a particular act of Christ. It begins to look more and more like a cognitive in-breaking, the dawning of a new idea. It is at this early stage of the *Church Dogmatics* that Barth most resembles the neo-Schleiermachiian caricature von Balthasar depicts of a theologian only interested in God's radical alterity distilled into a moment of "absolute intensity."²³ The Incarnation becomes the *ne plus ultra* of a perfectly irruptive act, a Word spoken more abstractly over and over again from behind the curtain of the immanent trinity. This Word—as a pure act not unlike the words of a radically new insight—thus assumes into itself human action primarily in the form of many more words.

Barth's turn towards the doctrine of election in the second volume of the *Church Dogmatics* begins to complicate the caricature of him as merely another reformer placing God at a distant remove from nature. But in complicating this portrait, Barth leans even more heavily into a cognitive notion of act. Now, the act at the heart of 'actualism' has receded back to the very beginning of history. The purest act—the truly unaffected act—is found there, in God's choice to be nothing other than "God in His movement towards man, or, more exactly, in His movement towards the people represented in the one man Jesus of Nazareth."²⁴ Bruce McCormack has referred to this phase of Barth's thought as the "stabilization of election" in which the variety of divine acts find themselves "joined together as moments in a single, unified history."²⁵ All of the individual moments of transcendent speech interrupting human history now find their common origin in a single transcendent act, the free decision of God to be nothing other than the God who is revealed in Christ. The implications of this original, singular, incar-

²³ Balthasar, *Theology of Karl Barth*, 202.

²⁴ Barth, *CD II/2*, 7.

²⁵ Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909-1936* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997), 459.

national act ripple outward. An entire spectrum of human activity potentially finds itself responsive to God's free act in becoming human, and thus potentially a site of participation or disclosure of the transcendent God.

There is a kind of paradox about Barth's turn towards the humanity of God. The effects of this turn can make Barth appear increasingly Hegelian, increasingly open to divine availability in human affairs, increasingly willing to see in the world's activity the possibilities of many points of light reflecting the one great light. But while the effects might appear Hegelian, in a sense, they have only been achieved by doubling down on the neo-Kantian alterity of God's original advance on the human sphere. The act at the heart of actualism resembles less and less something akin to anything like an act as we would know it, and more and more the pure force of the noumenal gathered into a slender needle and pierced into the heart of the created world. That this piercing happens from even before the beginning of human being does little to change the basic mechanics. For the later Barth, the act of God's self-disclosure becomes increasingly abstracted from the particularity of Christ, even as it becomes increasingly aware of the particularity of human existence. None of Christ's acts resemble God's act; it is Christ's mere coming to be which is God's act.

Here we find the contested point with respect to discipleship which would require further study. To make the case that discipleship is the medium of God's self-disclosure is also to turn our attention towards the form of Christ as the perfect disciple. This attentiveness thus considers the actions of the God-human to be determinative not only for how one ought to be a disciple, but determinative of the very grounds from which other epistemic judgments can be made. If there is a kind of actualism at work in this thesis' argument, then the act at its heart is an act resembling Christ's own acts. And, in viewing the scope of Christ's life with crucifixion and resurrection at its climax, the real weight of meaning disclosed in those acts come not from their origin, but from their *telos*. One understands Christ's acts not in light of where they come from, but only in light of where his movement is directed towards, the cross and the empty tomb. This knowledge is only gained retrospectively, once one has passed through the cross and the tomb. Thought after discipleship suspends our present judgment not because there is

nothing which can be known about the present, but because there is no way of speaking truly about it without having walked the way of Christ.²⁶

Conversely, then, this teleological emphasis in the language of discipleship places us within range of another sphere of theological thought, a Catholic and Orthodox notion of divine revelation presently available through the analogical relation of present reality to its future self. Theology after discipleship will thus have to develop this critique of Barth while also considering where it stands among Barth's Catholic and Orthodox critics. The next section will briefly sketch where this alternate line of inquiry might lead us.

6.4 The Being of Discipleship Between Nature and Grace

While discipleship as it has been presented through the insights of Pascal, Kierkegaard, and Bonhoeffer might find some degree of convergence with post-Barthian Protestantism, its more substantial test is with respect to various models for an analogical account of the world's being with respect to God's being. The notion that theology might itself render a 'good' ideology to oppose the world's sinful ideologies is rooted in some version of an account of the bridge which human reason finds to divine intent. This bridge does not suggest the full, easy availability of divine logos to human reason, but it does suggest a kind of middle space whereby fallen human reason nonetheless finds its link to its own fulfilled nature, able—by God's grace—to be used as it was intended for the purposes of understanding God.

It is worth recalling that Pascal's version of Jansenism, as he defended it in the *Écrits sur la grâce*, argued for what he took to be just such a middle space between Protestant actualism and Jesuit semi-pelagianism.²⁷ Through participation in the 'movement of love,' the Christian might find her activity caught up in God's. This idea of a middle space between the fallen human sphere and God's own existence appears again for Kierkegaard in the way that the movement of struggle after God constitutes something different than merely remaining on either side of Lessing's ditch.²⁸ It appears even more fulsomely in Bonhoeffer's notion of the

²⁶ I have written more on this point in conversation with Kierkegaard and Bonhoeffer in Patrick Dunn, "Prophets, Faust, and First-Years: Bonhoeffer and the Language of Charismatic Experience," *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 2.2 (2016): 39-56.

²⁷ See section 2.3, above.

²⁸ See section 3.4, above.

Christ-Reality, the space in which God encompasses human reality.²⁹ The nature of this middle space is precisely where we find room for future conversations with contemporary Catholic and Orthodox theology.

This thesis has claimed that discipleship as the medium of God's revelation creates something akin to a space into which the disciple enters and from which knowledge is formed. To think about the space of revelation, or its abiding being in the world, is also to bring us in some relation to the Catholic notions of nature and grace. The principle debate within Catholic theology in 20th-century has been the division between neo-Scholastics and adherents of the *nouvelle théologie* over the relation of nature and grace. This section will briefly introduce that debate and suggest where further research might need to direct us in order to define theology after discipleship with respect to analogical language about God.

As a largely intra-Catholic discussion, the terms of the debate over nature and grace can be understood as a contest over which interpretation of Aquinas is more or less likely to correlate with the errors of Protestantism. Beginning with Henri de Lubac's (1896-1991) 1946 book *Surnaturel*, the focus of the debate has been on "the modern idea of pure nature."³⁰ De Lubac's concern is that early Scholastics such as Baius and Jansen were drawn into a particular Protestant reading of Augustine which advocated "the idea that the primitive state of Adam was a natural state, and in that sense a state of pure nature."³¹ At stake is whether Adam—as creature, in the state in which God intended him—was granted an entirely autonomous existence from the divine life, or whether being human is only an intelligible notion in light of some grace present to its condition. The first option leads one in a Protestant direction, it seems to de Lubac. In this case, Adam's fall logically necessitates a radical and complete separation from grace. The original autonomy of Adam's existence guarantees that when the relationship with God is severed, there is no latent goodness in his mere existing as a human being which can aide him.

De Lubac set the stage for the *nouvelle théologie* by arguing that even Adam in his sinful state possesses some measure of something akin to grace in some form. These many qualifiers are

²⁹ See section 4.5, above.

³⁰ Henri de Lubac, *Surnaturel: Études historiques*, new ed., ed. Michel Sales (Lonrai: Desclée de Brouwer, 1991, originally published in 1946), 148.

³¹ De Lubac, *Surnaturel*, 102.

necessary, because what we are talking about here is not grace, per se, but a kind of anticipation of grace. De Lubac draws this conclusion by pointing more narrowly to a particular way of interpreting Aquinas' notion of a *desiderium naturale*—"that man cannot willingly be turned away from beatitude, since naturally and necessarily he desires it."³² There are, as one of de Lubac's foremost contemporary critics has written, various ways of interpreting the *desiderium naturale*, but de Lubac reads it as "an insatiable thirst in humanity for God, a thirst that sends all humans onto an irrepressible religious quest and that can only be quenched by the vision of God."³³ Without this divine vestige granting a degree of creaturely freedom, God's own freedom would be constrained. As the gracious Creator, with the created world lost and wandering in its autonomy, love would necessitate intervention. But, as de Lubac would later write, "God can never be constrained, by any sort of exigency, to give himself to beings that come from his own hand."³⁴ Thus, to suggest that grace in some measure inheres to nature through the *desiderium naturale* serves to protect God's own freedom, insofar as it reserves the condition of humanity's own freedom for or against God. The alternative is the Protestant vision in which humanity is utterly enslaved to sin, and God is equally bound for the cross.

In *Surnaturel*, de Lubac attempts to occupy a paradoxical middle ground in which the *desiderium naturale* in humanity constitutes "something of God" without rising to the level of what could be called grace, in virtue of it not being the result of a new action of God beyond the original act of creation.³⁵ In his 1980 *Petite catéchèse sur nature et grace* de Lubac points out that the logic of the 'supernatural' is intended to resemble grace without being identical to it. If we use 'supernatural' to mean either "gifts . . . 'super-added' to man by his Creator" or to designate "the very general meaning of 'transcendental,'" then we are operating within the paradigm of pure nature which de Lubac has rejected from the beginning.³⁶ The first notion—the popular understanding of the supernatural as 'above-ness'—suggests that humanity in its very nature is not already directed towards the aims for which God created it, that grace must "wrest" man "from his specific finality in order to allow him access to a higher one."³⁷ The second notion—the dialectical Protestant correlation of the supernatural with transcendent 'beyond-

³² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, 94, i, co.

³³ Reinhard Hüter, *Dust Bound for Heaven: Explorations in the Theology of Thomas Aquinas* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 9.

³⁴ Henri de Lubac, *Le Mystère du Surnaturel* (Paris: Aubier, 1965), 75.

³⁵ De Lubac, *Surnaturel*, 487.

³⁶ Henri de Lubac, *A Brief Catechesis on Nature and Grace*, trans. Richard Arnandez (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1984), 24.

³⁷ De Lubac, *Brief Catechesis*, 24.

ness?—likewise suggests that the supernatural is not already present in humanity’s earthly condition, but must arrive from some entirely distinct realm. But, the relation of the supernatural to the natural:

is not a question of two substantial natures, incapable of copenetrating each other, one of which would override the other—or, as taught by extreme Lutheranism and Jansenism, the first actually suppressing or suffocating or mutilating the other in order to reign in its stead.³⁸

In opposition to the Protestant impulse to deny any merit to that which is not grace, the supernatural—as the ‘something of God’ which is like grace but not grace—can never be thought apart from the natural. The reverse remains true as well, and so nature cannot be conceived as possessing an autonomous existence apart from the Creator’s purposes.

Hans Urs von Balthasar’s (1905-1988) work supplemented the *nouvelle théologie* by suggesting that this ‘something of God’ ought to have a christological basis. It is only by the Incarnation, in von Balthasar’s view, that we can speak intelligibly about the end for which the world is destined, and thus that we can speak intelligibly about the real identity of creation. Christology plays a rigorously normative function for von Balthasar’s approach to virtually all questions, because it opens up the possibility of a truly “analogical relation” by which we may understand God.³⁹ If one item in the agenda of the *nouvelle théologie* is to question a radical disjuncture between nature and God, then the Incarnation is the place where “heaven’s movement toward earth and earth’s movement toward heaven . . . converge on a coming.”⁴⁰

With respect to nature, then, “the world’s reality,” meaning its proper essence before God, “is fulfilled only in Christ.”⁴¹ This claim necessarily entails a second, that in Christ’s free solidarity with the world, he “has gone deeper than the sinful world’s alienation and has overthrown it.”⁴² Thus, the world finds itself out of joint with itself. Its true nature “can only manifest itself

³⁸ De Lubac, *Brief Catechesis*, 35.

³⁹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *A Theology of History*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994, originally published in 1959), 20.

⁴⁰ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama V: The Last Act*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 118.

⁴¹ Balthasar, *Theo-Drama V*, 112.

⁴² Balthasar, *Theo-Drama V*, 113.

in transcendence.”⁴³ Yet, even this transcendent reality is not utterly foreign to the world’s present disposition. The world’s real self, transcendent of its present appearance in sinfulness, is located in “the finality and transcendence that is inherent in our becoming.”⁴⁴ Thus, the grace-though-not-properly-grace which remains in nature even after the Fall is its being “intended to unfold in the direction of *similitudo* by the exercise of freedom of choice.”⁴⁵ De Lubac’s lingering ‘something of God’ which opens nature up to grace finds its parallel in von Balthasar’s notion of “something of abiding being” which “is infused, by act or at least by *potentiality*, into man’s striving.”⁴⁶

This ‘something of abiding being’ is intelligible eschatologically only because Christ, the future of humankind, has appeared in the midst of history. On the cross, “the Son, in dying, bends the trajectory of time back into the circle of eternity.”⁴⁷ In an instant, at the resurrection, all the possibilities of nature are exposed. Because Easter “removes the whole atmosphere of despair and lostness’ from our mortal existence; believers find that ‘paths’ are revealed to them ‘leading to eternal time’.”⁴⁸ The ‘paths’ which lead the Christian—both existentially and intellectually—back into a deeper understanding of reality’s eschatological fulfillment is also achieved in Christ. In the Incarnation, we find “the Word of the Father returning to God with the whole human ‘accomplishment’, and the human accomplishment is precisely the ‘complete faith’, pure obedience.”⁴⁹

Significantly, for our purposes, the ‘pure obedience’ of the disciple is intricately woven into the formation and life of the Church. From the beginning, the salvific transition “from the place of alienation to the place of finding one’s own true identity is bound up for the individual Christian with an act.”⁵⁰ This act is baptism, the grace which “both meets the believer from the outside, as it were, but also constitutes the believer in his true reality.”⁵¹ As sacrament, this encounter in which the sinner both submits and is thereby set free is an encounter with Christ,

⁴³ Balthasar, *Theo-Drama V*, 113.

⁴⁴ Balthasar, *Theo-Drama V*, 113.

⁴⁵ Balthasar, *Theo-Drama V*, 113.

⁴⁶ Balthasar, *Theo-Drama V*, 113.

⁴⁷ Balthasar, *Theo-Drama V*, 129.

⁴⁸ Balthasar, *Theo-Drama V*, 129.

⁴⁹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Convergences: To the Source of Christian Mystery*, trans. E.A. Nelson (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983), 91.

⁵⁰ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Explorations in Theology IV: Spirit and Institution*, trans. Edward Oakes (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 150.

⁵¹ Balthasar, *Explorations IV*, 150.

but also where “the Church in Christ takes over the believer.”⁵² This is not to suggest that the Church possesses some substance independent of its nature as Christ’s body. Rather, it is an admission that Christ has already been busy with the work of establishing the Church. Indeed, it is the transformation from alienation to reconciliation which creates the Church even as the believer is received into the Church—“The Church comes into existence when the redeemed believer is ‘placed’ with the Son.”⁵³ In the very act of exerting some measure of authority over the believer, the Church “simultaneously recognizes that she in no way exists in herself but ‘in Christ’.”⁵⁴ Thus, the Church, precisely because it receives the calling to obedience, must find “its very origins as a sharing in Jesus’ Passion to bring about the coming reign of God.”⁵⁵ Consequently, we can say that “Christology is the inner form of ecclesiology.”⁵⁶ As such, “every discussion of ecclesial obedience . . . that does not proceed from Christology has already missed the point.”⁵⁷ The call to obedience is inherently Christological, insofar as it finds its purpose in the obedience of Christ, and thus in the very appearance of humanity in its eschatological form as reconciled submission to God. The Church both emerges from this obedience and serves as the community in which this obedience is made possible by testifying to the vision of a reconciled humanity.

From this perspective, the problem with Protestant thought is its dialecticism, insofar as this movement is necessitated by the assumption of a basic disjuncture. In von Balthasar’s reading, this disjuncture in Protestant theology is the overwhelming ontological sufficiency of God contrasted with corrupt human nature. The crisis of human thought is brought about by nothing other than the immensity and unutterable alterity of God *a se*. To put it in a Barthian language is to say that “God makes himself visible *in* the world as the Creator who transcends the world.”⁵⁸ This background conditions the insights of modern Protestant theologians straining to construct a theory of human rationality, notwithstanding the basic incompatibility of nature and grace.

A Protestant christocentric theology draws its language from the fullness of Christ, without any prior contextualisation of the meaning of Christ’s vocation within some theological frame

⁵² Balthasar, *Explorations IV*, 150.

⁵³ Balthasar, *Explorations IV*, 152.

⁵⁴ Balthasar, *Explorations IV*, 152.

⁵⁵ Balthasar, *Explorations IV*, 139.

⁵⁶ Balthasar, *Explorations IV*, 139.

⁵⁷ Balthasar, *Explorations IV*, 139.

⁵⁸ Balthasar, *Theology of Karl Barth*, 112.

which necessarily draws from some other source. Part of the ongoing and fundamental disagreement between Catholic and Protestant thought is over the existence of this theological frame, i.e. whether the Word of God speaks for itself or, in speaking, necessarily situates itself within a frame of reference larger than itself. In most cases, this frame is a redemptive history that makes reference to entities—Trinity, creation, sin, covenant, exile, Incarnation, church, new creation, etc.—which possess some conceptual autonomy, or at least superfluity, outside of a definition delivered by reference to the work of Christ.

One of the critical venues where this disagreement takes centre stage is in the language of the cross. There is often a sense in Catholic theology that the cross is a kind of supernova, a central void surrounded by a radiance illuminating everything but itself. It cannot be read on its own terms, but only indirectly via its connection to every aspect of redemption history which is not itself. It derives its meaning from Eden, from Passover, from the Incarnation, from Easter, from the Lamb's book of life, from the sacraments, from asceticism, prayer, penance, priestly meditation—from everything that is not merely the cross. For von Balthasar, as Catholicism's token representative here, every interaction with the language of the cross is a kind of misdirection, a hasty sleight of hand in which the mark sets out to examine Good Friday closely, blinks, and finds he has been holding Easter all along. There is a deep wariness of the Protestant path one takes when one merely reflects on the cross. In the Kierkegaardian 'absolute paradox' of the immortal God's death there can be, for von Balthasar:

no resting with this static form of expression. The paradoxical formulation has, rather, an inner dynamism which manifests itself in purposiveness (became poor, *so that* you might become rich). This finality kindles a light in the darkness of rational incomprehensibility.⁵⁹

The cross is both central and yet must be passed over quickly, its inherent logic drives us forward to safer ground, where its losses are couched in final victory. Better to follow every word on the crucifixion with an 'and yet' of resurrection. Tarrying too long on the cross itself invites a total darkness, a Hegelian collision between God and death. Hence, von Balthasar excitedly

⁵⁹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale: The Mystery of Easter*, trans. Aidan Nichols (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 53.

affirms what he takes to be Barth's "refutation of Kierkegaard."⁶⁰ Whereas the lonely Dane's God speaks an endless No, thoroughly negating nature, Barth's divine No is superseded by "God's Yes and Amen to himself and his creation."⁶¹ This is the real heart of the Word revealed, not the early Barth's apocalyptic decimation of human reason, but the later Barth's "immense revelation of the eternal light that radiates over all of nature and fulfills every promise."⁶²

Pairing Barth and Kierkegaard in this way, however, reveals the limits of von Balthasar's vision. It obscures the fact that there is already far more responsiveness to de Lubac's concerns in the Reformers than von Balthasar would care to admit. Pascal's Jansenism does not fit the meaning which de Lubac ascribes to Jansenism. It does not—as Pascal himself accuses the Protestants of doing—render divine cooperation impossible because of an infinite incommensurability. Kierkegaard's version of dialecticism, while not as positive as de Lubac might like, does permit in its movement something more than mere negation. And Barth, while affirming God's Yes, will not permit us to so casually skip past the *göttlichen Nein*.

The *nouvelle théologie* twists its language around an often strained and yet still elusive description of the "suspended middle," attempting to grasp the sense in which God's grace could be with nature in a way that is not 'grace' and that both is and is not 'with nature'. It fails to recognise in this attempt a convergence with what the Reformers were already doing, which was acknowledging in the Christian understanding of redemption the gradual disintegration of nature and grace as a simple binary. Von Balthasar can only read God's Yes spoken from Creator to creation, and thus as an affirmation that always shines brighter than any perceived rejection of the same, lest we fall into gross contradiction. But Calvin's insistence that God's Word is both a Yes to nature and a No to nature is not—as von Balthasar would have it—a "concept slipping from one meaning to the other."⁶³ Rather, it is an acknowledgement that, in light of Christ, we are no longer speaking about one thing, but of more than one thing, for which all our previous vocabulary is inadequate. In the Reformers, one finds a precursor to the *nouvelle théologie*'s tacit, begrudging admission that not everything in the expanse of redemption can be neatly categorised as belonging either to nature or to grace. Redemption history

⁶⁰ Balthasar, *Theology of Karl Barth*, 26.

⁶¹ Balthasar, *Theology of Karl Barth*, 26.

⁶² Balthasar, *Theology of Karl Barth*, 26.

⁶³ Balthasar, *Theology of Karl Barth*, 272.

may require us to acknowledge some *tertium quid*—perhaps even some *quartium* or *quintium quid*—which surpasses our personal conviction that history is split between that which my eyes can see and that which is God’s self. What is *simul iustus et peccator* other than an acknowledgement that there are realms of even my own being which do not belong to what seems most obviously to be my nature?

Here, the argument of this thesis draws closest to the reformers’ concerns, to Luther’s *sub contrario*, the appearance of God under the aspect of God’s opposite. Here, Pascal, Kierkegaard, and Bonhoeffer are all found to be common inheritors of Luther. Eschatologically, we can refine this apparent paradox. The suffering which is Christ’s, the wounds which he carries eternally, are something quite distinct from the Death bound to be eternally separated from Christ. And yet, from the disciple’s present, on the way, thirsting on the cross, there is nothing to distinguish between the two. Has the suffering servant been “handed over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord?”⁶⁴ Or is the servant suffering the same fate as Satan? How does one tell the difference, at Golgatha, between the man “numbered among the transgressors”⁶⁵ and the mere transgressor?

Only at Easter is the answer revealed. Only there does the suffering servant know his forsakenness as a mere sojourn in the wilderness. Until that moment, the disciple is bereft, can only return to his fishing nets, mourning, puzzling over the meaning of a residual ache for a lost messiah. At the empty tomb, von Balthasar is quite right that the absolute paradox of Good Friday is revealed as the gracious unity of divine intent. But this does not change the fact that, for the disciple, there exists a passage along the way of Christ in which the paradox is absolute. There exists a moment at which there is no telling between forsakenness and damnation, an utter inability to distinguish between God’s refining fire and God’s consuming fire.

Broadly speaking, the Catholic unwillingness to distinguish between forsakenness and damnation, between death and Death, very much parallels the inability to distinguish more clearly between nature and its redeemed essence. Both are variations on the unwillingness to admit any kind of *tertium quid* into the conceptual schema. If one presumes a doctrine of creation

⁶⁴ 1 Cor. 5:5

⁶⁵ Is. 53:12

indebted more to Plotinus than Genesis—a hermetic Oneness sloughing off a created Otherness—then there is nothing which is not eventually encapsulated in one or the other dyadic term. As illustration, consider von Balthasar’s critique of Barth’s notion of “the reality of nothingness.”⁶⁶ Barth, thinking through the implications which follow from “God’s activity as grounded in His election,”⁶⁷ begins to form a being of nothingness which contrasts with “the legitimate ‘not’”⁶⁸ of creation. The clear distinction between God and humanity—that which is not God—still resides in divine will. This “‘not’ belongs to the perfection of the relationship” between Creator and creature.⁶⁹ There is one division from God which is mere difference. But there is another kind of division. Divine election reveals that:

God is also holy, and this means that His being and activity take place in a definite opposition, in a real negation, both defensive and aggressive. Nothingness is that from which God separates Himself and in face of which He asserts Himself and exerts His positive will.⁷⁰

The God of Jesus is for humanity, and so that which God is against cannot be some mere creature—“it would be blasphemy against God and His work if nothingness were to be sought in this ‘not’.”⁷¹ Nor can we say that humanity even in its deepest sin is the negation of God, for God’s work is always for even this fallen creation. Thus, the “shadow side” of “the creature is contiguous to nothingness” because in abandoning God the creature welcomes nothingness, “is invaded from the other,” is the place where “nothingness achieves actuality in the creaturely world.”⁷² But neither this shadow side nor the boundary of God’s being—taken in itself—is what we really mean by nothingness.⁷³ We are left to conclude, then, that:

⁶⁶ Karl Barth, *The Church Dogmatics, Volume III/3*, eds. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance, trans. G.W. Bromiley and R.J. Ehrlich (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1960), 349.

⁶⁷ Barth, *CD III/3*, 351.

⁶⁸ Barth, *CD III/3*, 350.

⁶⁹ Barth, *CD III/3*, 349.

⁷⁰ Barth, *CD III/3*, 351.

⁷¹ Barth, *CD III/3*, 349.

⁷² Barth, *CD III/3*, 350.

⁷³ Barth, *CD III/3*, 350.

real nothingness is real in this third fashion peculiar to itself, not resembling either God or the creature but taken seriously by God Himself . . . it is not identical either with the distinction and frontier between God and creation or with those within the creaturely world.⁷⁴

In all these respects, we see Barth articulating an alternative to the needless, artificial rigidity of the presumption in favor of a simple nature-grace duality. And rather than confidently replacing a fabricated twoness with an equally fabricated threeness, the central lesson for Barth is found early in the section on nothingness:

We have here an extraordinarily clear demonstration of the necessary brokenness of all theological thought and utterance. . . It can never satisfy the natural aspiration of human thought and utterance for completeness and compactness.⁷⁵

Von Balthasar's response is dismissive. He wryly notes that Barth might caution theological thought, but nonetheless develops theologically an extraordinarily "bold ontology of this 'nothingness.'" ⁷⁶ And this is the inherent absurdity, for von Balthasar, that there is no such thing as an ontic reality to that which is not. It's a philosophical impossibility, "no ontology could entertain the idea that a reality could be a mere appearance and that, furthermore, this kind of pseudo-reality could have a ('third') form of 'being' on the basis of mere rejection."⁷⁷ There is only being, and there is non-being, which is to say, evil.

Von Balthasar is right that there is a great possibility of convergence between Catholicism and Protestantism with respect to how both eschatologically understand the similarity and difference between my present self and my true nature, or myself-in-Adam versus myself-in-Christ. But the difference between the two sides was never really located here. Instead, the difference has always been about the possibility and the means of my present access to the completion of knowledge awaiting my eschatological self. Von Balthasar might have been more sensitive to this claim had he been able to acknowledge the impoverished duality of nature-grace language, and thus able to read Reformation history as arising from something other than a wholesale

⁷⁴ Barth, *CD III/3*, 350.

⁷⁵ Barth, *CD III/3*, 293.

⁷⁶ Balthasar, *Theo-Drama V*, 205.

⁷⁷ Balthasar, *Theo-Drama V*, 207.

rejection of nature. Had he done so, he might have seen more clearly that the reformers' suspicion of human reason arises not from a prior misreading of the Fall's effects, but from peering deeply where von Balthasar would rather them not look, into the cross.

For the Catholic theologian, the present participation in Christ is more than present, it is a clear glimpse of the future. The intellect—uniquely among human capacities—rises for a moment to become its eschatological self, achieves a knowledge presently that is also the future fulfillment of its nature. To speak analogically is to draw a connection between the present orientation of creation and its true nature, even while admitting the distance between the two. It is to view, through the perfected intellect, the *telos* of creation, even if the intellect is simultaneously admitting that creation is not remotely close to this end. To speak analogically is to know something about what potential inheres to the nature of fallen creation now. And this speaking depends on the intellect surpassing its present, on the intellect becoming, however briefly, its future self. But here is the difficulty, for on what basis would we assume that the intellect is not like the rest of creation? Why, when the intellect confidently declaims on the true nature of existence, would we not wonder whether the intellect also stands at a vast distance from its true self? Why is the intellect alone given grace to traverse the distance between present and future? While the distance is preserved in all other respects, the faculty of reason skips to the end, an analogical language thus depends not on reason also being oriented towards its future, but on the intellect achieving that future presently.

It is at this point that further research would be needed to consider more fully what implications discipleship has for the possibility of eschatological knowledge. If part of the very definition of discipleship is a dependency on God in the midst of unknowing, if that unknowing is itself a participation in the life of Christ, then what then can we say about a teleological analogy? What can we say about present knowledge of a future reconciliation? If theology after discipleship potentially critiques Barth with a Catholic conviction about the present space of revelation, then it equally critiques Catholic theology with a Barthian concern that the purpose of this space of revelation may not be to grant the kind of knowledge we demand.

If discipleship is unlike mere word by being a kind of space, then it is unlike what we normally mean by space by being dynamic, by being person. To be a disciple is to be called towards this space, to aspire to participation in the divine activity which is the kingdom of God. The call stands apart from all other insights by being no new insight at all, but the conviction that one's

own insight is not to be trusted. The way along which one walks in this search is the imitation of Christ, taking up the actions of obedience and self-sacrificial love which is the life of Christ. In the imitation of Christ, the disciple's confidence in her own knowledge is subverted again and again by her unlikeness to Christ. But even in her likeness to Christ, even in her active participation, part of this participation includes the cross, the unknowing which belongs even to Christ. What arises for the disciple in this participation is a knowledge unlike anything she has called by that name before. Uncertain about the future, she is only certain about the presence and activity of the living God. All other confidences depend on this one, and all other confidences are only required to the extent that they lead the disciple into the truth which is Christ on his way.

6.5 Conclusion

In the history of Christian theology, an intensive focus on discipleship has traditionally been associated with elements of the Radical Reformation, with groups like the Mennonites and Hutterites, along with earlier cousins like the Moravians or later variations like the Quakers, eventually imparting a legacy to larger streams of Christianity like Methodism and Pentecostalism. While a significant part of Christian history, the conventional view is that these portions of the church are basically a-theological. They may have much to contribute to the piety and vitality of the church, but little interest in engaging with the church's intellectual task. In an excellent monograph on the subject, Robert Friedmann points out two reasons why the movements of the Radical Reformation produced little in the way of explicitly systematic theology. First, they faced a "perpetual emergency situation," constantly harried and persecuted by more powerful and established churches who perceived them as a threat.⁷⁸ When they did pause to write, most of their writing was concerned with the immediacy of their circumstances, not with the undergirding theory of their opinions. Second, Friedmann points out that—with a few exceptions—these movements seemed to hold little appeal for the "learned men" who made up a certain kind of classically trained and established theologian.⁷⁹ Those writers who could be called Anabaptist theologians had little knowledge of patristics, of medieval thought, of classical languages. Moreover, they themselves saw the efforts to gain that education as a kind of self-inflation, an unnecessary distraction from the task of following Christ, a kind of knowledge

⁷⁸ Robert Friedmann, *The Theology of Anabaptism: An Interpretation* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1973), 22.

⁷⁹ Friedmann, *Theology of Anabaptism*, 23.

used by the scribes to persecute the disciples.⁸⁰ An opportunity was thus lost on both sides. The magisterial reformers—finding the radicals unwilling to speak in the language of classical dogmatics—assumed that no theology was happening in those circles at all, and missed the chance to receive the depth of a theological challenge emerging from those quarters. The radical reformers—finding the educated and respected theologians unwilling to engage—assumed that taking the time to learn a dogmatic language in which they could pose their own questions and concerns would be a waste of time, a casting of pearls before swine. They failed to see resources within theology that might permit it to play a critical function essential to the disciple, the function of confronting the disciple with a divine negation of ideological assumptions. Both sides thus missed the chance to think through the Anabaptist claims as genuine concerns for dogmatic theology.

The concern of this thesis has been that the same pattern of missed opportunity is repeating itself today. Through the influences of neo-pentecostalism, much of Christianity in Africa and Latin America finds itself increasingly drawn into their own unique forms of the Anabaptist concerns. Broadly speaking, Global South theology tends to operate more in the *potentia* of the Word apart from words, in the “weakness” on which the “demonstration of the Spirit and of power” is written, far beyond “lofty words.”⁸¹ It is in some space not containable by language where the living God meets the life of the people, where the Spirit abounds in the possibilities of real existence for being addressed by and conformed to the work of Christ. An enormous variety of phrases have emerged from various corners of the universal church—*misión integral*,⁸² Immanuel Christology,⁸³ *Ssial-ui sori*,⁸⁴ “kingdom-negotiated identities,”⁸⁵

⁸⁰ Friedmann, *Theology of Anabaptism*, 19.

⁸¹ 1 Cor. 2:1-4

⁸² C. René Padilla, *Misión Integral: Ensayos sobre el Reino y la iglesia* (Buenos Aires: Nueva Creación, 1986).

⁸³ Justin S. Ukpong, “The Immanuel Christology of Matthew 25:31-46 in African Context,” in *Exploring Afro-Christology*, ed. John Samuel Pabee (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1992), 55-64.

⁸⁴ Roughly, “the voice of the people,” a magazine associated with the *Ssial* theology of the South Korean Quaker Ham Sok-Hon. Related to but distinct from *minjung* theology, *Ssial*—a term Ham used for the ‘people,’ but literally a combination of the Korean words for ‘seed and ‘kernel’—emphasized the interaction of theology not with merely the present needs of the masses, but with the people’s potential to be oriented towards a true humanity in a divinely-reconciled future. For more, see the chapter on “The Theology of Dissent” in Daniel J. Adams, *Korean Theology in Historical Perspective* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2012), 220-228.

⁸⁵ Deenabandhu Manchala, “Expanding the Ambit: Dalit Theological Contribution to Ecumenical Social Thought” in *Dalit Theology in the Twenty-first Century: Discordant Voices, Discerning Pathways*, eds. Sathianathan Clarke, Deenabandhu Manchala, and Philip Vinod Peacock (New Delhi: Oxford UP, 2010): 55-73, on 49.

to name a small sample. In their own ways, all testify to a broad interest in a theological language intimately addressing difficult contexts shaped by the same basic, hopeful desperation in which the early Christian communities lived: that life must become other than what it is, and soon. As John Mbiti puts it in his typically clear-sighted way, “African Christians put their faith first in practice; afterwards only a few of them care to deal with the theoretical theology of faith.”⁸⁶

This characterisation is true, in a sense, but only perpetuates our missed opportunity. Global South Christians are equally as harried as the radical reformers, and—in light of many pressing needs—often equally uninterested in taking up the full breadth of theological language that seems to belong to an entirely alien time and place, with no real consequence for the task of following God in their time and place. But what if the discipleship of African Christians, among others, was understood not as a dismissal of theology but as itself a theology? And what if this theology could serve as grounds for the language of traditional orthodoxy, taking up ancient questions both to challenge them and learn from them? The hope is that this thesis has served simply to raise this possibility, to begin to sketch its foundations. It has done so in the hope that future scholars, particularly from Global South contexts, will express a theological language that arises from the moment in which “pastors . . . engage people in theologising,” which is also to say, the process in which people are living while “understanding God.”⁸⁷

⁸⁶ John S. Mbiti, *Bible and Theology in African Christianity* (Nairobi: Oxford UP, 1986), 230.

⁸⁷ These words belong to Rev. Othusitse M.O. Morekwa, as recorded in an interview with the author of an excellent study on Christian theology in Botswana. See Mari-Anna Pöntinen, *African Theology as Liberating Wisdom: Celebrating Life and Harmony in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Botswana* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 89.

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