

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Revisiting Bavinck on Hegel: Providence, reason, and the unsublatable

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## Abstract

Herman Bavinck's reception of the organic motif has become in recent years the central locus for discussing the means by which the unity of his thought may be recognised. This article provides a critical reading of Bavinck on Hegel on the locus of providence for the purpose of contributing to the ongoing discussion that identifies the unity of Bavinck's thought not in his confessional self in simple opposition against the philosophies of his day, but rather in characterising Bavinck as an eclectic, orthodox and modern theologian. To this end this essay moves in three steps. First, we provide an analysis that showcases the nuanced points of contact between Bavinck and Hegel on providence. Second, the essay homes in on the specific ways in which the two thinkers diverge on the Creator–creature relationship. Finally, we close the essay by sketching the salient dogmatic and philosophical implications of the preceding analysis.

**Keywords:** Herman Bavinck; G. W. F. Hegel; idealism; organicism; providence; Reformed theology

Herman Bavinck's reception of the organic motif – ubiquitous as it was in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – has become in recent years the central locus for discussing the means by which the unity of his thought may be recognised. Earlier Anglophone interpreters identified Bavinck's organicism with its German idealist and romanticist counterparts, which led them to posit an irreconcilable tension in Bavinck's thought between his idealist and confessionally orthodox self.<sup>1</sup> More recently, this understanding has been decisively reshaped: instead of tracing Bavinck's use of organicism to the way in which the term was deployed in general within the last two centuries, recent work has attended to Bavinck's own self-conscious definitions, rooting the organic motif firmly in the works of Calvin and Reformed orthodoxy rather than

<sup>1</sup>Indeed, talk of 'two poles' that were not posited as a duality in the older Dutch scholarship led Anglophone interpreters to talk of 'two Bavincks' – a duality between his 'orthodox' and 'modern' self. See Jan Veenhof, *Revelatie en Inspiratie* (Amsterdam: Buijten & Schipperheijn, 1968), pp. 108–11, 267–8; for the two-Bavincks claim, see e.g. John Bolt, 'Grand Rapids between Kampen and Amsterdam', *Calvin Theological Journal* 38 (2003), pp. 263–80; Malcolm Yarnell, *The Formation of Christian Doctrine* (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing, 2007), pp. 49–59.

the soil of German idealism.<sup>2</sup> What has emerged is a recognition that Bavinck was a Reformed yet eclectic theologian, deploying what he deemed useful from modern theology and philosophy while standing upon his Reformed confessional heritage.

Yet further granularity is still needed in describing Bavinck's interactions with modern philosophers. It is one thing to note that Bavinck critically deployed the concepts resident in the idealist thinkers of his day, but it is another to show how precisely he did so. The recognition of the fundamental unity in Bavinck's thought thus creates an impetus for constructive and critical readings of his engagement with particular modern philosophers without seeing these readings as signs of inconsistencies in Bavinck's mind, and recent scholarship showcases this fruitful trajectory. Cory Brock demonstrated that Bavinck was utilising insights from Schleiermacher in Bavinck's account of the human self and its awareness of God.<sup>3</sup> N. Gray Sutanto has shown that Bavinck's use of terms like the 'Absolute' and 'representation' (*voorstelling*), for example, was informed by a critical engagement with empiricist idealist philosopher Eduard von Hartmann.<sup>4</sup> Bruce Pass further explored the way in which Bavinck's reading of Schelling informed his descriptions of the organic character of reality.<sup>5</sup> These authors show that Bavinck sought to wrestle with the genuine diversity found within the idealist and romantic traditions, and did not categorise them all under a single broad umbrella. Further, by setting aside the past binary readings that pit Bavinck's orthodoxy against his so-called idealist writings, interpreters are now showing how Bavinck navigated through the two intellectual milieux while remaining fundamentally committed to his Reformed tradition.

Yet within this new trajectory of thought what is still missing is a critical reading of Bavinck on arguably the most prominent German idealist philosopher in his time, G. W. F. Hegel. On the one hand, this is understandable, for, as we shall see, Bavinck charged Hegel with significant criticisms that showcase the basic philosophical and theological differences between the two thinkers. As Mattson has observed, in Bavinck's writings one often finds a 'self-conscious and relentless critique of Idealism, particularly by Hegel and Schelling'.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, a close reading of Bavinck's use of Hegel would showcase that Bavinck's criticisms were not launched without a substantial engagement with Hegel's concepts and a recognition of some positive features in Hegel's project. This article attempts to fill this gap in the literature by providing a close and constructive reading of Bavinck's use of Hegel that is also attentive to the current scholarship on the same.

Bavinck's reception of Hegel was critical yet reciprocally nuanced. That is, while Bavinck did diverge from Hegel in fundamental ways, his interaction with Hegel showcases a degree of receptivity and nuance that could not be characterised as a simple repudiation of the German philosopher. Bavinck did not distance himself from Hegel without articulating appreciation for particular points and carefully reappropriating

<sup>2</sup>See esp. Brian Mattson, *Restored to our Destiny: Eschatology and the Image of God in Herman Bavinck's Reformed Dogmatics* (Leiden: Brill, 2012) and James Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism: Toward a New Reading of Herman Bavinck's Organic Motif* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012).

<sup>3</sup>Cory C. Brock, *Orthodox Yet Modern: Herman Bavinck's Use of Schleiermacher* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020).

<sup>4</sup>N. Gray Sutanto, *God and Knowledge: Herman Bavinck's Theological Epistemology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), esp. chs 5–6.

<sup>5</sup>Bruce Pass, *The Heart of Dogmatics: Christology and Christocentrism in Herman Bavinck* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2020).

<sup>6</sup>Mattson, *Restored to our Destiny*, p. 50. See also Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, pp. 66–7.

specific Hegelian parlance. One way this is seen is in reviewing what these two thinkers have to say on the relationship between the created and the divine. Providing a critical reading of Bavinck and Hegel together on the locus of providence or the Creator–creature relationship will not only encourage Hegelians and Hegel scholars to consider Bavinck as a dialogue partner, but also contribute to the ongoing discussion that identifies the unity of Bavinck’s thought not in his confessional self in simple opposition to the philosophies of his day, but rather in characterising Bavinck as an eclectic, orthodox, modern theologian.<sup>7</sup>

To this end this essay moves in three steps. First, we provide an analysis that highlights the nuanced points of contact that Bavinck and Hegel share on divine providence. Second, the essay homes in on the specific ways in which the two thinkers diverge on the Creator–creature relationship. Finally, we close the essay by sketching the salient dogmatic and philosophical implications of the preceding analysis.

### Bavinck and Hegel in dialogue: On providence

It is essential to clarify that Bavinck did not construct a doctrine of divine providence in a manner that acquiesced to or was determined by the intellectual challenges of his day. An exposition of divine providence was to him a matter of revealed doctrine, and hence the dogmatic task is faithfully to receive that which God has said. Implications to be drawn from divine providence must thus be subordinated to God’s own speech. In this, Bavinck would agree with John Webster’s claim that ‘*disputatio* is subordinate to *expositio*’.<sup>8</sup> Bavinck would thus resonate with Karl Barth’s view that ‘all reflection on how God *can* reveal himself is in truth only a “thinking after” (*Nach-Denken*) of the fact that God *has* revealed himself.’<sup>9</sup> This is shown by Bavinck’s famous reappropriation of Johannes Kepler’s language of ‘thinking God’s thoughts after him’. This shared sensibility highlights what might in a carefully qualified sense be called the ‘speculative’ aspect of the respective theological methods of Barth and Bavinck. Of course, both theologians have vehemently rejected ‘speculative’ modes of philosophising. Sigurd Baark’s recent work, however, relocates Barth’s oeuvre in the novel interpretational framework of a ‘speculative’ theology characterised by the German idealist method of ‘reflection’ (namely, *Nachdenken*).<sup>10</sup> As suspicious as the description ‘speculative’ may seem to Barth and Bavinck scholars (and indeed to Barth and Bavinck themselves), Baark reminds us that ‘speculation’ is essentially a method rooted in the

<sup>7</sup>See esp. Cory Brock and N. Gray Sutanto, ‘Herman Bavinck’s Reformed Eclecticism: On Catholicity, Consciousness, and Theological Epistemology’, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 70/3 (2017), pp. 310–32.

<sup>8</sup>John Webster, ‘On the Theology of Providence’, in Francesca Aran Murphy and Philip Ziegler (eds), *The Providence of God* (London: T&T Clark, 2009), p. 161. Webster continues on the same page: ‘Dogmatics has a twofold task: an analytic-expository task, in which it attempts orderly conceptual representation of the content of the Christian gospel as it is laid out in the scriptural witness; and a polemical-apologetic task in which it explores the justification and value of Christian truth-claims.’ It is worth emphasising, however, that Bavinck’s goal isn’t reducible to apologetics, nor is he merely exploring the value of Christian truth-claims. His goal was in a sense more ambitious: he set it to *demonstrate* the persistence and inevitability of Christian claims – one can’t get away from those claims, even in the so-called non-dogmatic sciences.

<sup>9</sup>Karl Barth, *Instruction in the Christian Religion*, vol. 1 of *The Göttingen Dogmatics*, ed. Hannelotte Reiffen, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1991), p. 151. Cf. Karl Barth, *Unterricht in der Christliche Religion*, vol. 1 (Zurich: TVZ, 1985), p. 185.

<sup>10</sup>Sigurd Baark, *The Affirmations of Reason: On Karl Barth’s Speculative Theology* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 22.

Anselmian tradition of *fides quaerens intellectum*. This fundamental definition of ‘speculation’, perhaps not altogether familiar to the fields of Barth and Bavinck studies, is in fact well acknowledged in the secondary literature on German idealism. For example, Howard Kainz emphasises that Hegel echoes ‘Anselm’s *credo ut intelligam* faith’ as ‘the foundation for speculative philosophy’.<sup>11</sup>

It is of course not without reason that Bavinck (as well as Barth) finds the specific mode of rationalistic speculation culminating in Hegel so appalling.<sup>12</sup> In many ways Bavinck’s discourse on providence and scientific inquiry, fraught with Hegelian terminologies, can be appreciated as a polemical dialogue with Hegel’s panlogistic mode of speculation. Yet there is in fact at least one aspect of Hegel’s speculative philosophy that the Dutch dogmatician deems worthy of salvaging.

In the generation of Hegel and Schelling, scientific inquiry in continental Europe had become overwhelmingly naturalistic under the influence of Kant’s critical philosophy, among other intellectual and cultural trends. Bavinck thinks (rightly or not) that even the theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher, one key founder of the world’s first modern research university in Berlin, ‘agreed with [Kant] in the doctrine of the unknowability of God’.<sup>13</sup> Under Kant’s influence, Bavinck observes, ‘the doctrine of the unknowability of God has progressively penetrated modern consciousness’.<sup>14</sup> As a result, the modern sciences up to Bavinck’s (and our own) day have become an increasingly naturalistic enterprise that attempt to strip themselves of every last vestige of theistic understandings of divine providence – the ‘hand of God’ so to say.

Hegel, according to Bavinck, represents a hiatus in this historical progression of naturalistic consciousness in modern Europe. ‘Hegel ... had another position.’<sup>15</sup> Hegel attempted to offer a theistic understanding of *Wissenschaft* by reintroducing the religious representation of providence as a philosophical concept. Philosophy, especially logic, is for Hegel the *concept* (*Begriff*) of science, that is, science in its pure form. As ‘the pure science’ in which all sciences culminate, philosophy (especially logic) ‘is the description of God’s being as such’, that is, as ‘the Idea itself’.<sup>16</sup> Scientific inquiry is for Hegel, as rightly understood by Bavinck, the process through which ‘Reason ... raises itself step by step through several stages to the level of absolute knowledge, then looks at truth face to face and knows its essence to be Reason, Thought, the Idea itself’.<sup>17</sup> In Hegel’s own words, science in its pure essentiality (i.e. logic) is the process in which

consciousness is spirit as concrete, self-aware knowledge – to be sure, a knowledge bound to externality, but the progression of this subject matter, like the development of all natural and spiritual life, rests exclusively on the nature of the pure

<sup>11</sup>Howard Kainz, ‘Hegel, Providence, and the Philosophy of History’, *Hegel-Jahrbuch* (1995), p. 184.

<sup>12</sup>The extent of Barth’s appeal to and criticism of Hegel has been a topic of intense debate in the secondary literature. For a recent assessment of the debate, see Shao Kai Tseng, ‘Barth on Actualistic Ontology’, in George Hunsinger and Keith Johnson (eds), *Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Karl Barth* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2020), pp. 739–51. Cf. Shao Kai Tseng, ‘Karl Barths aktualistische Ontologie: Ihre Substanzgrammatik des Seins und Prozessgrammatik des Werdens’, *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 61 (2019), pp. 32–50.

<sup>13</sup>Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* (hereafter *RD*), 4 vols, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003–8), vol. 2, p. 43.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*

essentialities that constitute the content of the logic. Consciousness, as spirit which on the way of manifesting itself frees itself from its immediacy and external concretion, attains to the pure knowledge that takes these same pure essentialities for its subject matter as they are in and for themselves. They are pure thoughts, spirit that thinks its essence.<sup>18</sup>

Dean Moyar comments that ‘Hegel’s deduction claim is that the Concept is the basis of a “pure science” because it is the truth of all the shapes of consciousness, where this claim for justification can be cast in more epistemological terms as an anti-skeptical strategy for grounding knowledge.’<sup>19</sup>

Spirit in itself (*an-sich*) is not yet God – it is not yet absolute. God needs the world as an Other (*Anderssein*) in order to become God. Hegel uses the organic metaphor of ‘cultivation’ (*Bildung*) to describe the history of Spirit’s self-alienation and self-reconciliation as a process in which human consciousness passes from representational understanding to conceptual understanding of the whole of reality.<sup>20</sup> The history of cultivation comprises a painful process of self-alienation in which Spirit seeks to understand and recognise (*anerkennen*) itself as an objective Other, followed by a process of self-reconciliation through which it finally realises itself as both *in* itself and *for* itself (*an-und-für-sich*) – the speculative and positively rational moment of the Logic in which Spirit becomes the Absolute. The driving force of this process is Spirit’s desire for conceptual understanding of the *whole* truth. Hegel uses the organic metaphor of plant growth to explain this: ‘When we want to see an oak with all its vigour of trunk, its spreading branches, and mass of foliage, we are not satisfied to be shown an acorn instead.’<sup>21</sup>

Hegel’s science of logic is the study of the moments of this dialectical history of the cultivation of Spirit. Because this is a history guided by the rationality of divine activity, Hegel proclaims that ‘Universal History’ is a ‘manifestation’ of ‘Providence’, or rather the *concept* represented by the Christian doctrine of divine providence.<sup>22</sup> Kainz thus observes that ‘Hegel’s Philosophy of History is a rational/conceptual elaboration of the Christian concept of Divine Providence.’<sup>23</sup> For Hegel, then, the whole enterprise of scientific inquiry *essentially* (here we use ‘essence’ in a specifically Hegelian sense as what a thing has in it to ultimately *become*, which determines what the thing *is* at present) hinges upon providence as God’s active involvement in universal history.

While recent Hegel studies under the leadership of post-Kantian interpreters like Terry Pinkard often tend to appeal to historical-critical readings of the philosopher

<sup>18</sup>G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, ed. and trans. George di Giovanni (Cambridge: CUP, 2010), p. 10.

<sup>19</sup>Dean Moyar, ‘Absolute Knowledge and the Ethical Conclusion of the *Phenomenology*’, in Dean Moyar (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Hegel* (Oxford: OUP, 2017), p. 167.

<sup>20</sup>Hegel makes an all-important distinction between ‘concept’ (*Begriff*) and ‘representation’ (*Vorstellung*). Representational thinking is a form of understanding associated with sensibility, while conceptual thinking is to grasp the rational essence of something. Anglophone scholars often use ‘Concept’ with a capital C to designate the all-encompassing *Begriff*, the consummately rational, i.e. Reason itself as the Absolute, which Hegel equates with God. For Bavinck’s use of these terms, see N. Gray Sutanto, ‘Neo-Calvinism on General Revelation: A Dogmatic Sketch’, *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 20/4 (2018), pp. 495–516.

<sup>21</sup>G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, trans. J. B. Baillie (New York: Macmillan, 1931), p. 76.

<sup>22</sup>G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, trans. John Sibree (New York: Dover, 1956), p. 15.

<sup>23</sup>Kainz, ‘Hegel, Providence, and the Philosophy of History’, p. 184.

as a naturalistic and social thinker, Kainz focuses on Hegel's textually perspicuous statements to highlight the philosopher's metaphysical and theistic intents. Thus Kainz: 'Unlike Marx, Huxley, Nietzsche, Spengler and Spencer, who in very diverse ways tried to extrapolate the theory of organic evolutionary progress into the social and cultural realms, Hegel, who explicitly rejects the possibility of physical evolution, concerns himself with the specifically spiritual evolution of mankind.'<sup>24</sup>

This theistic impulse of Hegel's speculative approach to science is precisely what Bavinck finds especially appealing and dangerous at the same time. Bavinck comments that when 'supernaturalism succumbed under the blows of Rousseau and Kant, Lessing and Schleiermacher', it was Hegel who brought about 'a mighty reversal'.<sup>25</sup> When Fichte's version of 'absolute idealism led to various appalling results' in which scientific objectivities were obliterated, it was Hegel who, 'while preserving the same starting point' with which Fichte countered the naturalistic milieu of the day, launched the valiant 'attempt ... to arrive at objectivity from within the subject' of human consciousness.<sup>26</sup> Hegel did this by raising 'the subjective ethical idealism of Fichte to the level of an objective logical idealism' and replacing 'the idea of being by that of becoming. The universe became a process, a development of the logical idea'.<sup>27</sup> As we have seen, it is in this theistic rather than physical 'evolution' of the universe 'that religion', especially its representation of divine providence, 'had its place'.<sup>28</sup>

Hegel's speculative approach to science, however, leads to results that contradict his own theistic intentions. First, Bavinck comments, 'the crucial question' with regard to rationalism in general 'is this: Do we think a thing because it exists or does a thing exist because we necessarily and logically have to think it? Speculative philosophy affirmed the latter.'<sup>29</sup> 'But' – and herein lies Bavinck's criticism of Hegel's basically Cartesian mode of speculation –

however much resemblance there may be between thought and existence, the difference between them is no less real. From thought one cannot conclude to existence because the existence of all creatures is not an emanation of thought but arises from an act of power. The essence of things is due to the thought of God; only their existence is due to his will. Human thought, accordingly, presupposes existence. It arises only upon the basis of the created world.<sup>30</sup>

Here Bavinck appears to be following Kant's comment that Descartes' 'I think therefore I am' is in fact an 'analytic proposition', if the 'I am' is taken to signify the existence of the thinking subject: it would be a predication of clarification in which the predicate does not amplify the information contained in the subject, because 'I think' already presupposes 'I am'.<sup>31</sup> While this critique is often overshadowed by Kant's much more famous refutation of Descartes' ontological argument for God's existence, Kierkegaard recognises that it is Kant's breakdown of the *cogito ergo sum* that gets to the heart of

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 185.

<sup>25</sup>Bavinck, *RD*, vol. 1, p. 517.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., vol. 1, p. 521.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid. See also Sutanto, *God and Knowledge*, pp. 127–33.

<sup>31</sup>Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Cambridge: CUP, 2007), B407.

modern speculative philosophy.<sup>32</sup> It is not clear whether Bavinck is intentionally echoing the Danish thinker's post-Hegelian reiteration of Kant's critique of Cartesian speculation. Whatever the case, Bavinck continues to emphasise that 'we can only reflect (*re-reflect*) on that which has been *pre-conceived* and comes to our consciousness through the world'.<sup>33</sup> This re-reflection on the basis of pre-conception is the aspect of rational speculation that Bavinck shares with Anselm and Hegel.

The problem with the particularly Cartesian mode of scientific speculation culminating in Hegel is that 'if ... one rejects all matter that has come to us from without and adopts as one's starting point pure reason ..., one retains nothing, or at most a principle so general, so devoid of content and vague that nothing – let alone the entire universe or all of Christian revelation and religion – can be deduced from it'.<sup>34</sup> Thus Bavinck comments that 'Hegel's philosophy was ... not as harmless as it originally seemed to be. It was the working out and application of Fichte's thesis that the ego posits the non-ego, that the subject creates the object'.<sup>35</sup> It should be noted that in the case of Hegel's speculative metaphysics, this creation of the object by the subject is a process of self-alienation in which the subject objectifies itself from itself. The subject and object in Hegel's logic are consummately identical, and this implies an ultimate divine-human identity.

Of course, Bavinck's view of Hegel as a pantheist may not be entirely fair. Karl Krause, a younger contemporary of Hegel, famously coined the term 'pantheism' to stress that Hegel's system still retains a sense of divine transcendence to the universe. Michael Rosen may well be right that 'Hegel's attack on traditional oppositions between "transcendence" and "immanence" does not amount to ... a dissolution' of 'God into His creation'.<sup>36</sup> Even so, however, Hegel still envisions God and creation as consummately (though not, as in the case of the early Schelling, immediately) identical. This ultimate and essential identity reduces God to a rational concept, enabling creatures to know God through a kind of rational-scientific speculation that Bavinck firmly rejected.

Bavinck points out that Hegel's presupposition of ultimate divine-human identity inevitably obliterates the latter's very theistic intentions. This 'became clear', Bavinck observes, in the immediately ensuing generation of Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–72) and David Friedrich Strauss (1808–74), both of whom purported to be followers of Hegel.<sup>37</sup> It is true that their respective interpretations and applications of Hegelian philosophy have been disputed since their own days.<sup>38</sup> However, Bavinck aptly observes that the two erstwhile Berlin students both took Hegel's position that 'God and man are one' to its logical end, and 'both Feuerbach and Strauss ended up in materialism: sensual nature is the only reality; human beings are what they eat'.<sup>39</sup> That is, the pantheistic core of Hegel's idealism inevitably leads to a materialistic and naturalistic worldview in which divine providence is excluded. While later dialectical materialism would attempt to retain Hegel's view of history as purposive activity, Bavinck's prophetic mind

<sup>32</sup>See Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, ed. and trans. Edna Hong and Howard Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), pp. 38–42.

<sup>33</sup>Bavinck, *RD*, vol. 1, p. 521.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid.

<sup>36</sup>Michael Rosen, *Hegel's Dialectic and Its Criticism* (Cambridge: CUP, 1982), p. 78.

<sup>37</sup>Bavinck, *RD*, vol. 1, p. 166.

<sup>38</sup>For a detailed exposition of Bavinck's treatment of Hegel, Feuerbach and Strauss, see Shao Kai Tseng, *G. W. F. Hegel* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2018), pp. 111–16.

<sup>39</sup>Bavinck, *RD*, vol. 1, p. 256.

predicted that such a worldview would eventually (as western societies have subsequently witnessed) strip the scientific enterprise of any legitimate probing into the realm of teleology.

Bavinck points out that atheistic ‘materialism’ envisions the universe as ‘a mechanism that is brought about by the union and separation of atoms’.<sup>40</sup> With Hegel, Bavinck sees the need to reinterpret the traditional metaphysical notion of substance as *living* substance, rather than mechanical parts of an inorganic universe.<sup>41</sup> Yet Bavinck’s organicism, as we shall see anon, differs fundamentally from Hegel’s.

### Bavinck contra Hegel: on the unsublatable

James Eglinton explains that ‘Hegel’s organicism leads to monism and understands the *telos* of organicism in that light. His organicism is also closely related to his overall panentheistic concerns.’<sup>42</sup> Bavinck’s organicist understanding of providential history, on the other hand, presupposes a strict Creator–creature distinction characteristically espoused by the Augustinian tradition. He stresses that it is ‘the confession of God as the Creator of heaven and earth that immediately brings with it the one absolute and never self-contradictory truth, the harmony and beauty of the counsel of God, and hence the unity of the cosmic plan and the order of all of nature’.<sup>43</sup> Citing the German philosopher and sociologist Friedrich Albert Lange’s (1823–75) work on materialism, Bavinck insists that only on the basis of the ‘full scope of nature’ as such, in which ‘one attributes to the one God also a unified manner of working’, can ‘the connectedness of things in terms of cause and effect’ become not only ‘conceivable but even a necessary consequence of the assumption’.<sup>44</sup> This, says Bavinck, is the ‘natural order’ that ‘Scripture itself models to us’ concerning ‘a wide range of ordinances and laws for created things’.<sup>45</sup>

Bavinck begins his positive exposition of providence by describing it as the ‘entire implementation of all the decrees that have bearing on the world after it has been called into being by creation’.<sup>46</sup> It is the work of God in preserving and governing all that exists *outside of God* – not as emanations or any evolution of the divine being-in-itself, for God’s perfect being-in-himself is on Bavinck’s view unsublatable (and here Anselm and Bavinck are in fact in agreement against Hegel) – whether in the economy of nature or of grace. As such, it is an all-encompassing doctrine, the implementation of God’s freely known decree in time. ‘All the works of God *ad extra*, which are subsequent to creation, are works of his providence.’<sup>47</sup> God sustains all that is *outside of God* moment-to-moment in a manner concurrent with their natures, which preserves the integrity of creatures as secondary causes and guides them toward a particular end.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>40</sup>Bavinck, *RD*, vol. 2, p. 435.

<sup>41</sup>For the implications of this for Bavinck’s doctrine of scripture, see Bruce Pass, ‘Upholding *Sola Scriptura* Today: Some Unturned Stones in Herman Bavinck’s Doctrine of Inspiration’, *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 20/4 (2018), pp. 517–36.

<sup>42</sup>Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, p. 66.

<sup>43</sup>Bavinck, *RD*, vol. 2, p. 612.

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 604.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 606–9. Hence, Bavinck explicitly rejects occasionalism: ‘Creation and providence are not identical. If providence meant a creating anew every moment, creatures would also have to be produced



As the unfolding of God's wise plan *ad extra*, God's providential ordering of all things exhibits the diverse perfections of his being. 'All things are based on thought,' Bavinck wrote in a way that is both reminiscent of and polemical against the speculative mode of science culminating in Hegel, insofar as it appeals to Augustine's understanding that God had implanted 'hidden seeds,' 'seminal reasons' and 'original principles' into his creation.<sup>49</sup> It is reminiscent of Hegel, because all things are based on thought, but it is polemical, too, precisely because this 'thought' is not the coalescing of divine and human activity, but purely of God's alone. In a later work, Bavinck would appeal to the empiricist idealist Friedrich Adolf Trendelenburg to argue that it is precisely because the world has its origin in the 'divine wisdom' that a 'unified (*einheitliche*) worldview' becomes possible.<sup>50</sup> Bavinck follows Trendelenburg's own definition of a worldview as a 'science of the idea' (*Wissenschaft der Idee*): because created reality is the product of divine wisdom, human thought can correspond to God's, but always ever on a created, ectypal level, along with all of the 'interconnected' orders that bind the manifold 'laws and relations' that exist 'in every sphere' of created existence. This includes 'the physical and the psychological, the intellectual and the ethical, the family and society, science and art, the kingdoms of earth and the kingdom of heaven'.<sup>51</sup> Bavinck further demonstrated that this understanding of divine providence is firmly rooted in the classical doctrine of divine ideas as the *exemplary* causes of created things: 'The word must be joined by the deed, generation must be joined by creation, wisdom must be joined by God's decree, in order to grant a real existence to what existed eternally in the Divine consciousness as an idea.'<sup>52</sup> The idealist language here again reveals Bavinck's refutation and emendation of speculative science: he is emphasising, contra Hegel, that divine ideas (plural!) do not evolve into existence, but rather give rise to existence *ex nihilo*, and uses language from the idealist tradition of consciousness and thought to communicate the older orthodox teaching on the divine ideas and decree.

In his *Reformed Dogmatics* Bavinck took pains to warn against understanding the connections between divine ideas and what exist outside of God as 'mechanical', which is a reductionist tendency of materialist worldviews.<sup>53</sup> However, he also cautions against the temptation to follow Hegel's version of theistic organicism. He points out that Hegelian 'pantheism attempts to explain the world dynamically; materialism

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out of nothing every moment. In that case, the continuity, connectedness, and "order of causes" would be totally lost, and there would be no development in history.' Bavinck, *RD*, vol. 2, p. 607.

<sup>49</sup>Bavinck, *RD*, vol. 2, p. 609. Earlier (*RD*, vol. 2, p. 373), Bavinck argued that God's 'decree is the "womb" of all reality'.

<sup>50</sup>Herman Bavinck, *Christian Worldview*, trans. and ed. N. Gray Sutanto, James Eglinton and Cory Brock (Wheaton, IL: Crossway), p. 51. See Friedrich Adolf Trendelenburg, *Logische Untersuchungen*, 2 vols (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1862), vol. 1, pp. 5–6; vol. 2, p. 461.

<sup>51</sup>Bavinck, *RD*, vol. 2, p. 610.

<sup>52</sup>'Bij het word moet de daad, bij de generatie de creatie, bij de wijsheid het besluit Gods komen, om aan wat eeuwig als idee in het Goddelijk bewustzijn bestond ook een reel bestaan te schenken.' Bavinck, *Christelijke wereldbeschouwing* (Kampen: Kok, 1913), p. 56. On the next page, Bavinck argues that the older saying *forma dat esse rei* (the form gives existence to the thing) must be understood biblically and not Hellenistically, as forms have no independent existence and cannot serve as the efficient cause of created things, but rather are brought into existence solely by the will of God. On this, he cites Johann Heinrich Alsted, *Encyclopaedia septem tomis distincta*, vol. 1 (Herbonae Nassoviorum: Corvinus Erben, 1630), p. 615.

<sup>53</sup>Bavinck, *RD*, vol. 2, p. 610.

attempts to do so mechanically. But both strive to see the whole as governed by a single principle.<sup>54</sup> Hegel's theistic idealism, as we have seen, fails to recognise God as the Creator of the universe, and is thus ultimately materialistic and atheistic. Bavinck explains:

In pantheism the world may be a living organism ..., of which God is the soul; in materialism it is a mechanism that is brought about by the union and separation of atoms. But in both systems an unconscious blind fate is elevated to the throne of the universe. Both fail to appreciate the richness and diversity of the world ... Both deny the existence of a conscious purpose and cannot point to a cause or a destiny for the existence of the world and its history.<sup>55</sup>

In a 'deadly bath of uniformity' both organic idealism and mechanistic materialism 'erase the boundaries' between different natures within creation – 'heaven and earth, matter and spirit, soul and body, man and animal', etc. – as well as the qualitative difference between Creator and creature.<sup>56</sup>

Bavinck's warnings hark back to his treatment of God's decrees and creation in earlier pages of the *Reformed Dogmatics*. There, Bavinck had argued that the Christian doctrine of God as the Trinity requires us to see creation anew. As creation is the product of a triune God and bears the imprints of his ideas, 'all of the works of God *ad extra* are only adequately known when their trinitarian existence is recognized'.<sup>57</sup> How, then, does creation display a 'trinitarian existence'? Bavinck's answer is that creation, read in light of scripture and spiritual illumination, displays 'vestiges' of the Trinity, and that the 'higher a thing's place in the order of creation, the more it aspires to the triad'.<sup>58</sup>

Here Bavinck combines the *vestigium trinitatis*, first instituted by Augustine, with a committed adherence to the Augustinian principle of *creatio ex nihilo*. This means that Bavinck's affirmation of the vestiges of the Trinity and the aspiration of higher orders of creation to form triads does not lead him into a quest to find fixed triads that mirror God's being. For Bavinck, the triune God alone enjoys an absolute three-in-oneness, and creation displays its triune shape not by exhibiting distinct triads but by its *organic* character.<sup>59</sup> Creation's organic shape and the organic relatedness of the diverse parts of creation become an ongoing motif used by Bavinck throughout his writings to communicate the distinctiveness of the Christian worldview. A significant passage on this is as follows:

Scripture's worldview is radically different ... Everything was created with a nature of its own and rests in ordinances established by God. Sun, moon, and stars have their own unique task; plants, animals, and humans are distinct in nature. There is the most profuse diversity, and yet, in that diversity there is also a superlative kind

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., p. 435.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., p. 333.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid.

<sup>59</sup>See Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, p. 89. On the implications of this claim to the doctrines of original sin and the image of God, see N. Gray Sutanto, 'Herman Bavinck on the Image of God and Original Sin', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 18/2 (2016), pp. 174–90.

of unity. The foundation of both diversity and unity is in God. It is he who created all things in accordance with his unsearchable wisdom, who continually upholds them in their distinctive nature, who guides and governs them in keeping with their own increased energies and laws ... Here is a unity that does not destroy but rather maintains diversity, and a diversity that does not come at the expense of unity, but rather unfolds it in its riches. In virtue of its unity, the world can, metaphorically, be called an organism, in which all the parts are connected with each other and influence each other reciprocally.<sup>60</sup>

An organic worldview that upholds the Creator–creature distinction and insists upon the immutable and unshakable perfections of God maintains both unity and diversity in a way that resists the tendency of a reductionism that either fails to do justice to the manifold ordinances within creation or which simply identifies being with becoming. Said in another way, reading creation (*ex nihilo!*) as the ordained manifestation and ectypal reflection of God's triune being disciplines Christians to be holistic thinkers – to take into account all of the relevant phenomena and patiently to trace the connections between them until an explanatory account emerges that does justice to the diversity and unity of creation and the distinction between the Creator and the creation. This is a clear advantage that a distinctively Christian organic worldview has over a mechanical (materialist) as well as a dynamic (pantheistic/panentheistic) one: 'It is only when we exchange the mechanical and dynamic worldview for the organic that justice is done to both the oneness and diversity, and equally to being and becoming', refusing then a 'one-dimensional' view of the world.<sup>61</sup> If the mechanical and dynamic worldviews are 'exclusive' (*exclusief*), the organic view recognises the proper place of mechanical and dynamic explanations, but refuses to reduce 'life, consciousness, freedom, and *telos*', (*leven, bewustzijn, vrijheid, doel*) into mechanistic or monistic realities.<sup>62</sup>

In sum, divine providence preserves, governs and respects the secondary causes of creatures and the diverse increased natures and relations within created things, as a result of the divine ideas from which they originate. Further, God has patterned creation into an organic shape consisting of unities-in-diversities.<sup>63</sup>

## Conclusion

Given the established unity of Bavinck's thought, current Bavinck studies has focused on Bavinck's reception of and conceptual relationships with particular thinkers in the modern era such as Barth, Thomas Reid and Schleiermacher, as well as other

<sup>60</sup>Bavinck, *RD*, vol. 2, pp. 435–6.

<sup>61</sup>'Dan alleen komt én de eenheid én de verscheidenheid, zoowel het zijn als het worden zijn recht, als wij de mechanische en dynamische wereldbeschouwing door de organische vervangen. Volgens deze is de wereld geen eentonig eenerlei, maar zij bevat eene volheid van zijn, eene rijke afwisseling van verschijnselen, eene bonte veelheid van scheselen.' Bavinck, *Christelijke wereldbeschouwing*, p. 50.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid.

<sup>63</sup>For treatments on how Bavinck related this organicism to the natural sciences, see Abraham Flipse, *Christelijke wetenschap: Nederlandse rooms-katolieken en gereformeerden over de natuurwetenschap, 1880–1940* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2014), pp. 97–103. Also see his 'The Origins of Creationism in the Netherlands: The Evolution Debate among Twentieth-Century Dutch Neo-Calvinists', *Church History* 81 (2012), pp. 104–47 (esp. pp. 112–16). Unlike Flipse's more historically oriented contributions, however, this essay focuses more specifically on Bavinck's use of the doctrine of providence.

philosophical trends in romanticism and modernism, in order to show the generative capaciousness of Bavinck's mind as a fruitful dialogue partner.<sup>64</sup> This article hopes to continue that trajectory in offering this close reading of Bavinck on Hegel. In this essay we have examined Bavinck's formulation of the biblical doctrine of providence and the implications that it carries for human attempts to make sense of the world scientifically and systematically. Having focused on Hegel as an important dialogue partner on this topic, we have found significant similarities and fundamental divergences between the two thinkers, which we hope will encourage further exploration of Bavinck's use of Hegel in other dogmatic *loci*.

First, Bavinck's famous rejection of philosophical 'speculation' is not as simplistic as it appears at face value, especially given the recent scholarship on Hegel. At the core of Hegel's speculative method is a kind of *Nachdenken* characterised by Anselm's *fides quaerens intellectum* programme. Bavinck's fondness for the idealist term 'worldview' (*Weltanschauung*) betrays his commonality with that intellectual milieu on the desirability of systematic endeavours to make sense of the world. This must consist in an intellectual *explicatio/expositio* of sensible phenomena, but on the basis of Christian faith.

Hegel's idealism, however, constitutes an attempt to revive the Cartesian mode of speculation once 'extirpated root and branch' by Kant's critique of reason.<sup>65</sup> Accordingly, Hegelian speculation finds its basis in a presuppositional kind of faith in the *cogito* and the *sum* of human consciousness. Human reason necessitates God's existence, and consequently God is reduced to a rational concept in the Hegelian system.<sup>66</sup> This is precisely why Bavinck rejected the kind of speculative thinking culminating in Hegel so carefully. For Bavinck, it is God's unsublatable mode of triune existence and his works of creation and providence as an *ad extra* revelation of his essence that guarantee the rational structure of the human creature made in his image. God's existence, already perfect in-and-for-itself, is not dependent upon human reason. Rather, God's being and works ground the possibility of human rationality and the rational structure of the created universe.

Second, Bavinck is in agreement with Hegel that the concept of divine providence is a *sine qua non* for warranting the rationality of scientific *Nachdenken* of the world and its history. Hegel was deeply wary that the increasingly naturalistic worldviews undergirding the various scientific disciplines of his day would marginalise the teleological dimension of the scientific enterprise. This would inevitably strip away rationality from human understandings of the world. Hegel thus insisted upon seeing the universe and its history as the outworking of an ultimately rational divine plan. However, Hegel's speculative starting-point in human consciousness means that he must posit a consummate divine-human identity in order to uphold a providential view of the world. Providence, per Hegel, is not an *ad extra* outworking of God's will, but an evolution

<sup>64</sup>Ximian Xu, 'Herman Bavinck's "Yes" and Karl Barth's "No": Constructing a Dialectic-in-Organic Approach to the Theology of General Revelation', *Modern Theology* 35/2 (2019), pp. 323–51; N. Gray Sutanto, 'Herman Bavinck and Thomas Reid on Perception and Knowing God', *Harvard Theological Review* 111/1 (2018), pp. 115–34; N. Gray Sutanto, 'Neo-Calvinism on General Revelation'; Cory Brock, 'Between Demonization and Dependence: Bavinck's Appropriations of Schleiermacher', *Ad Fontes* (2018), pp. 1–7; Bruce Pass, 'Herman Bavinck and the Problem of New Wine in Old Wineskins', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 17/4 (2015), pp. 432–49.

<sup>65</sup>Hegel, *Science of Logic*, pp. 7–8.

<sup>66</sup>For an elaboration of this, see N. Gray Sutanto, 'The Mistake of Idealism in Organic Knowing: The Theological Epistemology of Herman Bavinck', PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 2017.

of God's very being-in-becoming. This amounts to a dissolution between primary (divine) and secondary (creaturely) causes, and thus a denial of the *concursum Dei*: Hegel's system leaves no room for any genuine concurrence of the primary cause with secondary causes.

In our presentation of Bavinck's doctrine of providence, we have pointed out his emphasis on the divine *concursum* as the fundamental principle underlying divine *conservatio* and *gubernatio*. Louis Berkhof aptly observes that 'Dutch dogmaticians' from the early modern period on have given 'the element of concurrence greater prominence, in order to guard against the dangers of both Deism and Pantheism'.<sup>67</sup> Bavinck's formulation of the *concursum* maintains against Hegelian pantheism a strict Creator-creature distinction, as well as an abiding distinction (albeit within an inseparable union) between God's being and works. God decided to create the universe by an *ad extra* act of his will that perfectly corresponds to his essence, but this act of the divine will is not, has never been and will never be a necessary aspect of God's being. In other words, God did not, does not and will never need the world as an other in order to actualise himself as God. Providence is the *ad extra* execution of God's will as a *revelation* of God's immutable essence. It is not identical with God's essence, and it does not alter or sublimate God's being in historical process.

Third, both Bavinck and Hegel envision providence in organic trinitarian patterns. The anthropocentric starting-point of Hegel's speculative logic means that his logical Trinity, conceived in human image (as Feuerbach has revealed), is one in which God's being is ultimately sublated in the moment of becoming. Hegel's organic metaphors are aimed at explicating the view that the Logic is a subject or living substance undergoing organic growth to sublimate itself. Bavinck, as we have seen, shows that Hegel's logical-trinitarian organicism inevitably reduces the will of God to the common fate of humanity, destroying the boundaries between diverse natures within creation because of the ultimate (though not immediate) sublation of the Creator-creature distinction.

Bavinck's starting-point is the self-revealed triune God whose absolute subjectivity is unsublatable. God is perfectly God in his triune essence qua Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Creation and providence *reveal* God's essence but do not *actualise*, *constitute* or *determine* it. But because God is the living God, in the Creator-creature relation-in-distinction, creation as the ectype is endowed with organic natures reflective of its unsublatable archetype in the pattern of unity-and-diversity. Creation as a living entity, moreover, does not 'grow' by itself. To borrow the theological grammar of a famous phrase from Barth, creation and providential history are the 'outward basis' of God's ideas, while the latter constitute the 'inward basis' of the former. These ideas do not evolve into existence. Rather, they give rise to creaturely existence external to God's being via the act of *creatio ex nihilo*, and continue to sustain creaturely modes of existence and progress in such a way that creation and its history are *inherently revelational* but not *inherently divine* (i.e. creatures are never emanations of divine natures or ideas).

The revelational nature of creation and history means that human understandings of the world can be systematic and organic, as long as we think God's thoughts after God. Contra Hegel, the human mind is not consummately rational. That is, we are not rational by *absolute essentiality*. The rationality of the human mind hinges upon God's *ad extra* revelation and the divine gift of faith through regeneration. Only on

<sup>67</sup>Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1958), p. 133.

the basis of faith in providential revelation can scientific and systematic attempts to understand the universe and its history affirm the rationality of the creaturely objects of human knowledge.