

THEOLOGY AND ECONOMY 'AFTER' BARTH

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Abstract

The relation of theology and economy is a perennial theological challenge. Many contemporary theologians' understanding of this challenge is shaped by Karl Barth's attempt to resolve a set of tensions problematising this relation inherited from figures like Kant and Feuerbach. Barth 'identified' God's decision to be God with God's decision to be human. Further, he inconsistently but insistently claimed that the 'form' in which God reveals Godself in the person of Jesus somewhat isomorphically corresponds to God in Godself. The brilliance and yet instability of Barth's approach spawned a number of construals of theology and economy which depart from him in significant ways. I label these contemporary trajectories the post-Barthian temptation, Barthian revisionism, Barthian Balthasarianism, and Barthian catholicism and critically evaluate them, suggesting that Barthian catholicism is the most promising.

Challenges for Theology and Economy 'after' Barth

Karl Barth's *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, has at its heart the drastic proposition with which we begin: 'God's deity, into its furthest depths ... [is] the event in which we are involved in that the crucifixion and resurrection occur among us.'¹

At the heart of the 'copernican revolution'² wrought by Barth's theology of revelation is this claim that there is no gap between God's eternal being and what God *does* in the world to reveal Godself. Eberhard Jüngel similarly suggests that Barth aims to avoid a descent into 'a metaphysics which, in Platonic fashion, divides reality into two 'worlds', in one of which God exists 'for himself' and in the other of which God exists 'for us.'³ This is the heart of Barth's rejection of a pseudo-nominalist 'God behind God' or *Deus absconditus*. Furthermore, it is the root of his revisionary,

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¹ Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 1:221. Citing: Karl Barth, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik* [Henceforth KD] (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1932), II/1, 288.

² Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 105.

³ Eberhard Jüngel, *God's Being Is in Becoming*, trans. John Webster (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014), 45.

actualistic ontology. As Barth summarises, if ‘God is who He is in the act of His revelation’, then an ontology is required which ‘holds together being and act, instead of tearing them apart like the idea of ‘essence [*Wesen*].’⁴ Barth secures this identity between revealer and revelation in various ways across the *Church Dogmatics*, including; his trinitarian account of revelation in I/1, his account of the ‘unity of the Lord with his glory’ in II/1, the inclusion of election within the doctrine of God in II/2, and the account of Christ as witness in IV/3.

One can hardly overstate how influential this set of convictions is for contemporary theology and how crucial it has been taken to be for responding to an interrelated set of theological crises associated with the early modern period. These crises have been narrated in a variety of ways, with figures like Hume, Descartes, Kant, Lessing, and Feuerbach often represented as principal villains. The problem *in nuce* is that, as Colin Gunton states with characteristic panache, a ‘disastrous breach’ was revealed ‘between an essence of God, unknowable and indeed impersonal’ and God’s revelatory economic activity, i.e. between the ‘two worlds’ to which Jüngel referred in our prior citation.⁵ God’s essential being was thought to be unknowable to creatures given an unbridgeable gap between God’s infinite being and the conditions of finite cognition which undergird our phenomenal and/or historical experience. While modern critics like those cited above were thought to have *exposed* this disastrous breach, its roots were often associated, by virtue of various theological genealogies, with assumptions deeply rooted in the Christian theological tradition. Different figures or movements were blamed.⁶ Gunton—who again serves as a particularly striking example of broader trends⁷—provocatively alleges that the defective approach to theology and economy associated with figures like Augustine divides the impersonal and unknowable divine essence from the triune persons’ revelatory acts in history. He identifies this division of theology from economy as the distant source of modern atheism.⁸ We outline the nature of this crisis in greater detail below, yet one of the key attractions of Barth’s dogmatic project is that it is widely thought to have provided a decisive response to these criticisms of the possibility of theological knowledge by unifying theology and economy. Barth suggests that creatures can know God in Godself on the basis of God’s acts in the world because revelation is not mere manifestation but is simply God’s eternal being, present to and active among creatures.

Yet Barth’s convictions about theology and economy generate two lacunae which he never fully resolves. In what follows, I begin by outlining the nature of these lacunae. I proceed to assess four broad trajectories in contemporary systematic theology aiming to secure Barth’s achievement by retrieving key aspects of his method of unifying theology and economy while simultaneously eliminating the lacunae which render his

⁴ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, edited by Geoffrey W Bromiley and T.F. Torrance [Henceforth CD] (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), II/1, p.257; KD II/1, 293.

⁵ Colin Gunton, *Act and Being* (London: SCM Press, 2002), 92-93.

⁶ Barth’s account of theological nominalism in KD II/1 is an influential example of this sort of genealogy.

⁷ See for example Stephen Holmes’s narration of this worry in some standard introductions to systematic theology. Stephen Holmes, ‘Divine Attributes’, in *Mapping Modern Theology*, edited by Bruce McCormack and Kelly Kapic (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 47-65. Stephen Holmes, ‘The Attributes of God’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, edited by John Webster, Kathryn Tanner, and Iain Torrance (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 54-71.

⁸ Colin Gunton, ‘Augustine, the Trinity and the Theological Crisis of the West’, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 43, no. 1 (February 1990): 33-58.

approach dogmatically unstable. The first is what I term the 'post-Barthian temptation'. This trajectory denies 'protological aseity', the belief that God is essentially complete apart from the economy. I present some Barth-inspired objections to this trajectory's inability to secure a robust account of divine immutability and freedom. These two latter emphases, I suggest, are essential to Barth's response to the criticisms of theological knowledge we have summarised. I proceed to identify three other trajectories which, in different ways and unlike the 'post-Barthian temptation', aim to preserve some sense of God's pre-determination in protology and divine immutability: I term these the 'Barthian catholic', the 'Barthian Balthasarian', and the 'Barthian revisionist' respectively. The Barthian revisionist, against its intentions, fails to secure divine freedom and immutability while the Barthian Balthasarian faces an insuperable dilemma which threatens *either* to reduce it to a version of the Barthian catholic trajectory or to predicate an eternal trauma of the divine life. The Barthian catholic draws upon the key aspects of Barth's account of theology and economy we have identified—in particular, the unity of the divine being and act—yet bolsters his approach with some traditional insights like the unity of the processions and missions and the 'reduction' of God's economic acts of revelation to immanent divine attributes. I conclude that the Barthian catholic trajectory is the most dogmatically fruitful approach to theology and economy 'after' Barth.

My articulation of each trajectory draws on a number of contemporary theologians, but I select a single theologian as an exemplar of most trajectories. This way of proceeding has attendant limitations. While I raise what I take to be important objections to the figures selected as exemplars, these objections should not be assumed to apply without nuance to other figures within the trajectory. These objections are best understood as preliminary worries and obstacles for each trajectory but, of course, every theologian must be evaluated in their own right before definitive judgments are reached. While it is ambitious to discuss so many theological trajectories in a single essay, what is unveiled by this manner of proceeding is the way Barth's account of the unity of the divine being and act and the lacunae attending it are an essential backdrop illuminating the thought of a wide array of contemporary theologians.⁹ Responding to the early modern critics of theological knowledge by employing aspects of Barth's paradigmatic account of theology and economy, while at the same time seeking to rectify these lacunae, is a common, sometimes implicit, thread underlying these theologies. Grouping these theologians into trajectories helps to map out the possible options in contemporary dogmatics for securing Barth's link between theology and economy and thereby escaping these early modern criticisms. Therefore, this essay concerns more than merely the interpretation of Barth. It is not a sort of 'scholastic' exercise which marshals a set of quotations from the *Church Dogmatics* against an interlocutor's rival set of quotations in order to vindicate my reading of Barth. Rather, I aim to address some pressing objections confronting contemporary theologians and shaping their constructive accounts of theology and economy and the possibility of theological knowledge. This essay, then, concerns not solely or even primarily how best to read Barth, but how best to attain Barth's aim of securing the theological link between creatures—and creaturely knowledge—and God in Godself.

⁹ My dialogue with Barth focuses upon the latter volumes of the *Church Dogmatics*, so we need not address heated questions concerning Barth's theological development.

Two Lacunae in Barth's Account of Theology and Economy

Two lacunae arise in Barth's influential account of theology and economy, which asserts that God is the same in Godself as revealed *ad extra*. The first, is a question regarding the respective modal statuses—the necessity or contingency—of God's immanent and economic acts. The second is a question regarding the way predicates are applied to God's life *in se* and *ad extra*.

The first lacuna in Barth's account of theology and economy arises when one asks: if God is economically and immanently 'the same', then does this imply a modal uniformity between God's immanent and transitive acts such that whatever form of necessity applies to the divine being must likewise apply to God's actions in the world? One can also put this question in terms of the triune relations or, with Barth and his followers, use the language of self-determination, self-positing, or 'decision'—drawn from post-Kantian idealism.¹⁰ If one accepts that modal uniformity is required to secure the link between theology and economy, this means either both God's immanent acts (like God's self-affirming decision and triune relations) and transitive acts (like election, creation and redemption) are necessary or both God's immanent and transitive acts are contingent. Both options generate challenging consequences. If one opts for the former, creation and redemption are *necessary* and perhaps the gratuity or non-necessity of creation and redemption are undermined. If one opts for the latter, literally asserting that God's nature is determined by a contingent decision, one falls into incoherence. For the latter implies a being with intellectual and volitional powers who can make decisions 'before' that being's nature and thus those very decision-making powers exist (this is not Barth's position).¹¹ To deny this modal uniformity and to suggest that God's decision to incarnate, create, and redeem is contingent while God in Godself is necessary might suggest that God's transitive acts are disconnected from the necessary divine being. Perhaps this implies God's transitive acts are merely 'accidental' and fundamentally untrustworthy. Recent books by Brandon Gallaher and Bruce McCormack describe how this set of questions spawned crucial trajectories in contemporary theology.¹² We will survey some of these trajectories as this essay proceeds.

Another lacuna concerns what Tyler Wittman calls the 'somewhat isomorphic'¹³ relationship between predicates applied to God *in se* and *ad extra*. Barth says that God is 'himself' in divine revelation, such that God's acts in the world *just are* God in Godself in action without some immobile 'essence' standing unrevealed or inactive

¹⁰ See for example Katherine Sonderegger, 'The Absolute Infinity of God', in *The Reality of Faith in Theology*, edited by Bruce McCormack and G.W. Neven (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), 39–40.

¹¹ The 'before' in view here could refer to a metaphysical rather than temporal priority. If God literally, eternally but contingently chooses his nature, that still involves a decision upon which the divine nature depends. There is thus a 'decider' who is metaphysically prior to the production of God's natural powers like intellect and will. Modern theologians working in the wake of post-Kantian idealism often undermine the applicability of the distinction between necessity and contingency to the absolute. Yet this suggests they too worry about straightforwardly claiming God is contingent. For objections to the idea that God contingently determines the divine nature, see Keith Ward, *Religion and Creation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 159–91. Similar objections are raised by Athanasius. See Athanasius, 'Four Discourses Against the Arians', *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing, 1892), 3:63.

¹² Brandon Gallaher, *Freedom and Necessity in Modern Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). Bruce L. McCormack, *The Humility of the Eternal Son* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

¹³ Tyler Wittman, *God and Creation in the Theology of Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 182–86.

behind the divine acts *ad extra*. In defence of this conviction, Barth predicates a form of obedience that is proper to the divine Son in his inter-trinitarian relation to the Father. For Barth, if the incarnate life of Jesus Christ is 'the one unaltered because unalterable deity of God',¹⁴ then Jesus's temporal, human humiliation and obedience corresponds to an eternal relation of obedience to the Father. 'If what the man Jesus does is God's own work, this aspect of the self-emptying and self-humbling of Jesus Christ as an act of obedience *cannot be alien to God*.'¹⁵ In sum, an eternal obedience of the divine Son to the Father corresponds in a 'somewhat isomorphic' manner to Jesus's obedience in time. This fits with a broader pattern. Barth speaks of the 'readiness' [*Bereitschaft*] of God in Godself for self-revelation *ad extra* (see CD §26.1). George Hunsinger labels this principle 'antecedence'.¹⁶ It implies that for anything predicated of Christ temporally, the attributes of the inter-triune life provide the presupposition and ground of these economic acts. As T.F. Torrance says, 'what Christ is in all his life and action ... he is antecedently and eternally in himself as the eternal Son of the Father.'¹⁷

However, a tension immediately arises. Barth said obedience cannot be 'alien' to God if Jesus is obedient in time. But in the same context, Barth suggests that in Christ, the Son exists in the 'alien form' [*Fremdgestalt*] of a suffering, creaturely servant.¹⁸ Throughout CD §59.1, Barth rejects that the presupposition for the Son's obedience in time could merely be eternal generation. To evade the 'offensive fact'¹⁹ of eternal obedience implies that in Christ we are not brought 'into touch with God himself.'²⁰ It would imply that the way God reveals Godself is different from how God is immanently, reintroducing the gap between God's immanent being and economic action. However, Barth makes a crucial distinction:

From the point of view of the obedience [*Gehorsam*] of Jesus Christ as such [*als solchen*] ... [it concerns the] inner being of God as the being of the Son in relation to the Father. From the point of view of that form [*Form*], of the character of that obedience as an obedience of suffering [*Leidensgehorsam*] ... it is a matter of the mystery of His deity in His work *ad extra* [*seiner Gottheit in seine Werk nach außen*].²¹

Economically, Jesus's obedience is a *suffering* obedience, whereas the Son's immanent obedience is impassible. Similarly, for Barth, the Father suffers in participation with the 'alien suffering of the creature.'²² Paul Fiddes critiques Barth on this point. He suggests that insofar as Barth employs this distinction between the 'form' of God's life *in se* and *ad extra* and refuses to predicate suffering of the eternal triune life, he implies that 'the internal "work" of God is not really the same as his external work.'²³

¹⁴ CD, IV/1, 179-80.

¹⁵ CD, IV/1, 193.

¹⁶ George Hunsinger, *Reading Barth with Charity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), 8.

¹⁷ Thomas F. Torrance, *Incarnation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), 177.

¹⁸ CD, IV/1, 179; KD, IV/1, 198. He goes so far as to call the Son's existence in Christ 'alien and quite dissimilar' to his 'pure form' *in se*. CD, IV/3.1, 389.

¹⁹ CD, IV/1, 200.

²⁰ CD, IV/1, 196.

²¹ CD, IV/1, 177; KD, IV/1, 194.

²² CD, IV/2, 357 (emphasis added). Cf. CD, IV/1, 185-7; CD, II/2, 163.

²³ Paul Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 118-19.

Barth himself thinks these matters must be approached delicately. God's acts *ad extra* simply are God's eternal triune life active in the world. Yet unless the distinction between creator and creature is entirely collapsed, there will be aspects of the way in which the Son appears in creaturely form which must be distinguished from the attributes of God in Godself. As Rowan Williams baldly states in dialogue with Barth, 'the revelatory event, properly so called, is not simply identical with its historical form.'²⁴

Barth never satisfactorily explains the criteria by which one may determine what applies to the as suchness [*als solchen*] or 'content' of God's self-revelation in Christ which must apply both immanently and economically (such as obedience), and what applies merely to the economic 'form' [*Form*] and need not be predicated as an antecedent attribute (such as suffering). This tension applies to a variety of other divine attributes, which I will refer to as 'lowly' predicates (following Barth's language²⁵). They include: obedience, mercy, grace,²⁶ the overcoming of antitheses and distance,²⁷ and agapic self-denial.²⁸ For example, Robert Price says that in order to isomorphically predicate grace as an immanent attribute, Barth strips grace of nearly everything identifying grace as gracious, leaving 'the character of grace in the divine life ... so incomprehensibly and mysteriously connected to God's grace to us, that a *de facto* nominalism inevitably follows.'²⁹ Dogmatic nominalism is the label Barth employs to speak of the prior theological tradition's failure to properly unite God's being *in se* and acts *ad extra*, and as Price suggests, Barth's failure to clarify the relation between the 'form' and 'content' of revelation leaves his account vulnerable to the same charge with respect, not only to grace, but to all these lowly predicates.³⁰

In sum, two lacunae arise in Barth's account of theology and economy which are never finally resolved. Both lacunae revolve around questions of what it means to affirm that God is 'the same' *in se* as God is revealed *ad extra*. The first concerns the modal status of God's immanent and economic acts. The second concerns the relation between the 'form' in which God exists in Godself and the 'form' in which God is economically revealed. The following trajectories aim to secure some of the fundamental aspects of Barth's approach to theology and economy while resolving these lacunae.

The Post-Barthian Temptation

The 'post-Barthian temptation' is how McCormack labels a set of views—broadly associated with theologians like Jüngel, Jenson, Pannenberg, and Moltmann—influenced by Barth³¹ but which nonetheless severely undermine protological aseity. For this trajectory, God is not ontologically complete antecedently but is constituted through creation. The trajectory likewise involves a revisionary metaphysic in which the future retroactively

²⁴ Rowan Williams, *Wrestling with Angels* (London: SCM, 2007), 114.

²⁵ CD, IV/1, 186.

²⁶ CD, IV/3, 81.

²⁷ CD, IV/2, 343–44.

²⁸ CD, IV/2, 733; 755–57.

²⁹ Robert Price, *Letters of the Divine Word* (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 58.

³⁰ Price notes similar problems related to divine mercy and patience. Price, *Letters of the Divine Word*, 72; 80; 86–7.

³¹ The rest of this paragraph follows McCormack, *The Humility of the Eternal Son*, 164–95.

defines the being of God through either a sort of backwards causation or because God's identity and being unfold in time. Finally, there is a collapse of the second person of the Trinity into Jesus of Nazareth, such that the second person of the Trinity just *is* the God-man Jesus Christ without remainder.³² None of these thinkers are identical and tensions and disagreements arise between them, including with regard to the interpretation of the foregoing claims.³³ In what follows, I dialogue with Jenson as an exemplar of this trajectory.

According to Jenson: 'God is what happens to Jesus and the world. That an event happens to something does not entail that something must be metaphysically or temporally prior to it. God is the event of the world's transformation by Jesus' love.'³⁴ It is important to understand the various aspects of this dense set of claims set at the heart of the most foundational chapter of Jenson's *Systematic Theology*. To love, for Jenson, is to give one's future into the hands of the beloved. Loving thus transforms the lover, who in loving transcends them-self and attains self-definition through a shared history constituted by their own loving actions and the reciprocal actions of the beloved.³⁵ Thus, positively speaking, God's going out of or 'transcending' Godself in the incarnation is constitutive of the identity and very being of God³⁶ which is 'ambiguous'³⁷ and 'uncertain'³⁸ until the Son's mission of love is completed in his death and resurrection. Only through the lived history of God in Jesus and with Israel has God 'worked out his self-identification.'³⁹ The divine being then is not a set of immutable attributes but just *is* the 'dramatic coherence'⁴⁰ of Israel's history and Jesus's life, death, and resurrection.⁴¹ Negatively or polemically speaking, this consists in a ramified exercise in revisionary metaphysics, as Jenson aims to rethink the nature of 'being', both divine and creaturely being, in light of the Gospel.⁴² According to Jenson, Hellenistic thought wrongly defined 'being' as resistance to change rather than openness to the future and understood the present as overly determined by the past rather than seeing the present as the indeterminate space through which the reality of the future arrives.⁴³ Why might Jenson think that Hellenistically inspired, substance ontologies are overly fixed and determined by the 'past'? Of course for a

³² See for example Robert Jenson, 'Once More the *Logos asarkos*,' *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 13, no. 2 (2011): 130-33.

³³ Pannenberg and Jüngel are more reticent than Jenson and Moltmann to make divine perfection dependent upon the world.

³⁴ Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, 1:221. See also: Robert Jenson, *Story and Promise* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2014), 121; 128.

³⁵ Jenson, *Story and Promise*, 59; 137-40. Robert Jenson, *Visible Words* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1978), 20.

³⁶ Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, 1:189. On the identification of the divine 'identity' and 'being', see Robert Jenson, *The Triune Identity* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1982), 108-14.

³⁷ Jenson, *Story and Promise*, 60.

³⁸ Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, 1:65.

³⁹ Jenson, *Story and Promise*, 60.

⁴⁰ Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, 1:66.

⁴¹ Jenson affirms straightforwardly that death is a part of the eternal triune life and that 'God is what Jesus of Nazareth accomplished in life, what got done in the course of his history.' Robert Jenson, *On Thinking the Human* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 9. See also Robert Jenson, *A Religion against Itself* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2009), 33-34; 40. Jenson, *Visible Words*, 34-43. Jenson, ST, 1:59.

⁴² Cf. 'The whole of my systematics is in one aspect an effort of revisionary metaphysics.' Robert Jenson, 'Response to Watson and Hunsinger', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 55, no. 2 (May 2002): 230.

⁴³ Robert Jenson, 'The Futurist Option of Speaking of God', *Lutheran Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (February 1969): 17-25. Jenson, *The Triune Identity*, 57-60. Robert Jenson, *God after God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1969).

substance ontology, most beings are subject to radical forms of transformation in virtue of their acts in history. Yet nonetheless for a substance ontology—on Jenson’s interpretation—there is a limit to what something can become in communicative relationship with others since its essential qualities remain invariantly fixed insofar as it remains a certain kind of thing (e.g. a man can change a great deal through relating to others, but so long as he remains a man for Aristotle, he remains a rational animal). Such an approach, for Jenson, prioritises unchanging substance and the past over relational becoming and the future.⁴⁴ To ‘be’ is to *become* oneself through communicative relation with others without any underlying, unchanging substance standing behind these reciprocal, transformative acts.⁴⁵ This applies to God as well. When we predicate ‘love’ of God, we refer not to an essential characteristic God unchangingly possesses, which would necessarily characterise God regardless of whether God elected, created, and redeemed. No, for Jenson, love is an aspect of the lived existence of Jesus of Nazareth in which God transcends who God was and becomes Godself through dialogical, communicative engagement with others in history. At times, Jenson notes the way his critique of substance metaphysics and the notion of being as a dynamic movement of self-transcendence in which one is defined through mutual recognition resonates with certain aspects⁴⁶ of Hegelian philosophy.⁴⁷ As Jenson suggests, sounding a not uncommon Hegelian note: ‘God is himself only eschatologically, since he is Spirit.’⁴⁸ The key aim in all of this (and note the alignment with the Barthian approach to theology and economy we noted at the outset) is to unify theology and economy. This is accomplished by maintaining that the divine substance is not an unchanging, unrevealed substrate standing behind and potentially detached from God’s actions. Theology and economy are wholly unified as the becoming of Jesus unfolding in redemptive history is strictly identified with the coming to be of God in Godself.

What does this mean for Barth’s two lacunae? What of the lowly predicates which Barth struggled to locate in the eternal divine life? For Jenson, God *is*—without reserve or qualification—what happens in the redemptive economy. The distinction Barth draws between the content [*als solchen*] and form [*Form*] of God’s self-revelation can be dropped as a residue of unbaptised metaphysics. Jenson’s *Systematic Theology* includes no separate locus on the divine attributes precisely for this reason. This allows for the isomorphic predication of the attributes which obtain in Jesus’s life to God, since God’s being just *is* the dramatic coherence of Jesus’s life.

What of the question of the respective modal statuses of God’s decision to be God and to elect to create and redeem? Jenson evolves on this question, becoming increasingly

⁴⁴ I am not endorsing Jenson’s interpretation of substance metaphysics.

⁴⁵ Jenson, *On Thinking the Human*, 68–70. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, 1:80; 1:217.

⁴⁶ At other points, Jenson distances himself from Hegel, suggesting, in particular, that his view of time contrasts with Hegel’s. Robert Jenson, ‘Ipse pater non est impassibilis’ in *Divine Impassibility and the Mystery of Human Suffering*, edited by James Keating and Thomas Joseph White (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 117.

⁴⁷ Robert Jenson, ‘The Holy Spirit’, in *Christian Dogmatics*, edited by Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson, Vol. 2 (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1984), 105–7. He likewise associates his revisionary metaphysics with Hegel and German idealism, suggesting that German idealism was influenced by a biblical ontology unlike Hellenistic philosophy, which he sees as a rival religion. Jenson, *The Triune Identity*, 123; 136. Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 2:163.

⁴⁸ Jenson, *The Triune Identity*, 141.

consistent. He ultimately concludes that the question of whether God could have existed as God does apart from election and creation—whether God is necessary whereas creation is contingent—'concedes too much to our unbaptized notion of time.'⁴⁹ This question implies a timeline in which certain things are plotted 'earlier'—such as the divine decision whether to elect—and other things 'after'—such as creation.⁵⁰ In contrast, for Jenson, there is no divine subject in 'eternity past' making decisions about the world, not because the divine being is not event and decision,⁵¹ but because this divine, self-constituting decision is not predetermined. This decision is incomplete until the divine narrative unfolding in redemptive history is brought to completion,⁵² and therefore this story is not merely expressive of who God antecedently was but is definitive of the divine being and identity which God becomes.⁵³ In short, we cannot say that God or creation are either necessary *or* contingent. Instead, following influential trends in post-Kantian idealism, Jenson suggests these modal distinctions break down if God becomes Godself historically.⁵⁴

Jenson offers a rigorous and audacious version of the 'post-Barthian temptation'. How might one evaluate it in light of Barth's account of theology and economy? Bruce McCormack's key objection to the 'post-Barthian temptation' concerns its rejection of divine immutability:⁵⁵ "'mutability" in God introduces an element of the "arbitrary" into God's work *ad extra*—of *ad hoc* reaction to events as they unfold."⁵⁶ McCormack's worries are apt, and in what follows I extend his objection. Advocates of the 'post-Barthian temptation' might suggest that divine immutability represents a holdover from the substantialist, unbaptised metaphysics Barth overcomes.⁵⁷ In response, I demonstrate that divine immutability is central to Barth's account of the relation of theology and economy.

The post-Barthian temptation radicalises Barth's approach, yet fails to recognise that Barth's relating of theology and economy and his affirmation of divine immutability *together* constitute a single response to philosophical challenges arising for theology in early modernity. By denying divine immutability, advocates of the 'post-Barthian temptation' unintentionally undercut the motivations which initially undergirded Barth's innovative account of God's act and being, which is a major inspiration for their own. I cannot give a comprehensive account of the way Barth's innovative account of theology and economy responds to early modern crises, but I offer a summary, relying on some respected secondary works.

Johannes Hoff argues that Kant's *Critiques* engendered a crisis for early modern theology as they suggested that 'we are no longer justified in acknowledging any reality

⁴⁹ Jenson, 'Once more the *Logos asarkos*', 131.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* See also: Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, 1:216-18.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 1:221-22.

⁵² The divine being and identity is 'completed' and defined by Christ's death and resurrection for Jenson. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, 1:189. Jenson, *The Triune Identity*, 168; 178.

⁵³ Robert Jenson, 'What Is the Point of Trinitarian Theology?', in *Trinitarian Theology Today*, ed. Christoph Schwöbel (Edinburgh: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 1995), 31-43.

⁵⁴ See Gary J. Dorrien, *Kantian Reason and Hegelian Spirit* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 201.

⁵⁵ Cf. McCormack, *The Humility of the Eternal Son*, 177.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 194.

⁵⁷ Jenson, *Story and Promise*, 107-8. Jenson, *ST*, 1:94-96.

independent of what it appears to be for us.⁵⁸ The challenge for the possibility of knowing God after Kant was whether God could in principle be an object of knowledge given the strictures of human consciousness.⁵⁹ For Hoff, the most profound response to this Kantian problematic was provided by Hegel.⁶⁰ Hegel insists, corresponding to the Kantian strictures, that God is *essentially* precisely as God appears to us, and thus there is no gap between God in Godself and God's acts. According to Hoff, Hegel's response became a paradigm which was taken up—in a critical way—by Barth and others. It includes three features: first, 'God is essentially what God appears to be for us'; second, relational actualism must be favoured over substantialist metaphysics; and third, there can be no distinction between the immanent and economic Trinity. These features align with my description of Barth's account of theology and economy and the lacunae I identified revolve around the interpretation of each 'feature'.

Barth's most radical proposals—proposals often beloved of the post-Barthian temptation, such as his actualistic ontology, predication of an immanent obedience of the Son, and nervousness about the *Logos asarkos*—are rooted in his belief that only divine immutability can overcome the post-Kantian challenges to the possibility of knowing God. For Barth, immutability secures the absolute correspondence between the divine being and act required to respond to Kant's critiques. As he says in his discussion of the eternal obedience of the Son: 'If in Christ—even in the humiliated Christ born in a manger at Bethlehem and crucified on the cross of Golgotha—God is not *unchanged* and wholly God, then everything that we may say ... is left hanging in the air.'⁶¹ Positing mutations in God—such that God 'changes' when electing, becoming incarnate, or engaging with creaturely history—threatens the correspondence and unity between God and God's self-revelation.⁶²

⁵⁸ Johannes Hoff, 'The Rise and the Fall of the Kantian Paradigm of Modern Theology', in *The Grandeur of Reason*, ed. Peter Candler (London: SCM Press, 2010), 186.

⁵⁹ On my reading, the Kant of the Critiques allows for a form of *belief in* rather than *knowledge of* a supreme being, made possible by the transcendental positing of a moral arbiter and guarantor who accounts for humanity's moral nature. There is significant debate about what this distinction consists of. In my view, it minimally involves a downgrading of the character of the apprehension involved in mere 'belief'. The 'supreme being' we posit and thereby 'believe' in without 'knowing' is described by Kant as nothing more than a 'regulative principle of reason', 'faultless ideal', and 'mere thought-entity'. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, edited by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), A612/B640, A619/B647, A641/B669, A565-56/B593-94. We can settle nothing 'dogmatically' about this being. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B424. Some contemporary interpreters aim to overcome the widely held sense that Kant is an obstacle to be overcome rather than a positive resource for theology. Barth, and every trajectory we survey, thinks that we do not merely 'believe in' but have 'knowledge of' God even if this knowledge is analogical and/or dialectical. This, again, fits with Hegel's approach. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson, vol. 1 (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 86. While there is much to be gained theologically through dialoguing with Kant, at least some aspects of his thought represent an obstacle which theologies affirming creaturely knowledge of God must overcome. For a helpful account of Kant on these matters, see Christopher Insole, *Kant and the Creation of Freedom: A Theological Problem* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁶⁰ I cannot enter the important debates about Hegel's approach to metaphysics, which often circle round his approach to religion. In what follows, I am interested in what Hegel has meant for theology 'after' Barth. For a summary of contemporary interpretations of Hegel, see Paul Redding, 'Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Winter 2020 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2020). Nonetheless, the sort of reading assumed here is not outdated. For an approach largely consonant with the interpretation of Hegel assumed in this essay, see Frederick Beiser, *Hegel* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

⁶¹ Barth, CD, IV/1, 183 (emphasis added).

⁶² McCormack argues that divine immutability is central to Barth's account of the relation between theology and economy, e.g. Bruce McCormack, 'Divine Impassability or Simply Divine Constancy', in *Divine Impassability and the Mystery of Human Suffering*, 151-73.

All of this implies, in sharp contrast to the 'post-Barthian temptation,' that for Barth, in order to remove the gap between God's immanent being and economic act and to guarantee that God is in himself precisely as he reveals himself to be for us—as per the Hegelian paradigm—divine immutability is essential. It secures that 'God's essence and work are not twofold but one.'⁶³ Pointedly, then, unlike for advocates of the post-Barthian temptation, the cross and resurrection are not the 'dominating moment' of God's immanent life bringing it to completion, but only 'the dominating moment in *our conception of God*,' for we 'discover' the divine nature only in Jesus Christ.⁶⁴ The post-Barthian notion of a divine nature which only completes itself eschatologically destabilises our knowledge of God, raising the possibility of an unreliability in God's self-revelation.⁶⁵ In contrast, Barth insists that all that Jesus Christ does is a 'perfect image' [*Ebenbild*]⁶⁶ or 'correspondence' [*Entsprechung*]⁶⁷ to his eternal relation to the Father which is imaged but not changed by God's works *ad extra*. This thereby secures the absolute correspondence between God's life *in se* and *ad extra* not in spite of but precisely because of divine immutability.

Yet Barth's responses to the crisis afflicting theology in early modernity relied not only upon divine immutability, but likewise upon a robust account of divine freedom involving the contingency of God's transitive acts. As Sigurd Baark and Katherine Sonderegger argue, for Barth, divine freedom is always the condition of our epistemic reception of God's revelation rather than God being conditioned by our subjectivity.⁶⁸ This ensures that there is no *reversibility* between God and the world as per Feuerbach. For Feuerbach, God is the name given to the common nature of humanity when we projectively treat this generic nature as if it bore independent existence. God, for Feuerbach 'is the nature of man regarded as absolute truth.'⁶⁹ According to Barth, the root error of Feuerbach's approach is this positing of a reversibility between God and humanity, as if human nature in totality or creation collectively is simply another name for God. What is it that utterly and comprehensively undermines this reversibility between creation and creator or between humanity and God? For Barth, it is God's freedom to exist unchanged apart from creation. It is divine freedom, Barth suggests, which distinguishes his approach not only from Feuerbach but also from Hegel, despite the other similarities between their approaches we have noted.⁷⁰ In *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, Barth says that Hegel's 'confusions of human with divine self-movement also have their origin in this: in the failure to recognise that God is free.'⁷¹ It is because of this failure regarding divine freedom that Hegel—in Barth's view—falls into the same

⁶³ CD, I/1, 371.

⁶⁴ Cf. CD, IV/1, 177 (emphasis added).

⁶⁵ Cf. CD, IV/1, 183-85.

⁶⁶ CD, IV/1, 208-9; KD, IV/1, 228.

⁶⁷ CD, IV/1, 203; KD, IV/1, 223. Cf. CD, IV/2, 347-48; 351-52.

⁶⁸ Sigurd Baark, *The Affirmations of Reason: On Karl Barth's Speculative Theology* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 281. Katherine Sonderegger, *Systematic Theology: V.1: The Doctrine of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), 1:249-50; 1:148-52.

⁶⁹ Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1989), 19.

⁷⁰ Similarly to what we have suggested in dialogue with Hoff, Dorrien argues that Barth's thought mirrors Hegel in its revelatory trinitarian objectivism but departs in its emphasis upon divine freedom. Dorrien, *Kantian Reason and Hegelian Spirit*, 500.

⁷¹ Karl Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century* (London: SCM, 2001), 420.

reversibility afflicting Feuerbach: 'Hegel's living God ... is actually the living man.'⁷² For Barth, then, contra the post-Barthian temptation, affirming that God 'could have been God apart from God's elective decision to create and redeem' is not mere speculation, but secures that if God's act is God's being, this need not identify God with God's created effects. It is this latter identification which generates the Feuerbachian and Hegelian 'reversibility' of Creator and creature.

Let us explore why 'freedom' is so important in securing this non-reversibility, thereby enabling Barth to overcome these early modern objections to theological knowledge. The freedom in Barth's view here is what the scholastics call the freedom of indifference. What is crucial for Barth is that God's freedom in acting transitively must be distinguished from the sort of freedom characterising God's immanent acts (God's immanent acts are spontaneously but not indifferently free).⁷³ This is indispensable because, again, Barth is trying to secure the 'non-reversibility' of God's immanent productivity—i.e. the generation of the Son and spiration of the Spirit—and his transitive effects. Creation is not confused with Creator precisely because God's transitive actions are characterised by a liberty of indifference whereas the immanent relations of God are wholly natural and therefore necessary even if non-coerced and thus spontaneously free.⁷⁴

To outline why this might be the case (and to note the pedigree of Barth's claims), I briefly outline Athanasius's subtle discussion of whether the Son is begotten according to the 'will' of the Father. Athanasius says we must strongly distinguish the way the Son proceeds from the Father from the way creatures do. God's willing of creatures is something about which God 'counsels', i.e. God deliberates over the indifferently free choice of whether to create or not.⁷⁵ To 'counsel and choose involves an inclination two ways, and is incidental [rather than naturally necessary, and thus ontologically essential] to a rational creature.⁷⁶ If there was this 'inclination two ways' with respect to the generation of the Son, it would imply that it was possible that 'the Father could not will the Son' (i.e. it would imply that the Son is not necessary in an unqualified sense).⁷⁷ The Son, therefore, is produced by 'nature and not by will.' The Father's generation of the Son is naturally necessary and what is 'produced' by that act, i.e. the Son, is included in the divine nature.⁷⁸

⁷² *Ibid.*, 419.

⁷³ On this distinction, see Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 3:448–50.

⁷⁴ This need not rule out a suppositional or hypothetical necessity applying to God's transitive acts.

⁷⁵ Athanasius, 'Four Discourses Against the Arians', 3:61.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 3:62.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 3:66.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* 3:62. cf. 'A work is external to the nature, but a Son is the proper offspring of the essence; it follows that a work need not have been always, for the workman frames it when he will; but an offspring is not subject to will, but is proper to the essence.' *Ibid.*, 1:29. Thomas Weinandy suggests that this is 'the heart of Athanasius' entire conception of God.' For Athanasius, if the one God is the Father, then the Father is only eternally, unchangingly, and necessarily the Father if the Father eternally, unchangingly, and necessarily has a Son. The Son therefore is intrinsic to the divine nature. Thomas G. Weinandy, *Athanasius: A Theological Introduction* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 58–63; 75. Georges Florovsky similarly suggests that Athanasius's 'decisive contribution to Trinitarian theology' is to secure the 'absolute ontological priority' of theology over economy without dividing theology and economy. This is secured by contrasting the 'contingency' of the economy with the 'absolute necessity [of] the Trinitarian being of God.' Georges Florovsky, 'St Athanasius' Concept of Creation', in *Collected Works of Georges Florovsky*, 5 vols (Belmont: Nordland Publishing Company, 1972), 4:51–53.

For Athanasius, the 'product' (speaking very loosely) of God's immanent act of generation is divine *because* it is necessary. By contrast, God's transitive acts are produced not naturally but by a free act of deliberation which could have been otherwise. These transitive effects, then, precisely because they are contingent, are not 'natural' and therefore not ingredient to the divine nature. Subsequent figures like Gregory of Nazianzus stress that the begetting of the Son is not 'involuntary' in that it is not forced upon God against God's wishes and in this sense it is an act of the divine will. But this does not contradict Athanasius's claim.⁷⁹ As Khaled Anatolios says, dialoguing with a passage in which Athanasius affirms that the unity of Father and Son is a matter *both* of being and will:⁸⁰ Athanasius 'reject[s] that the being of the Son is the mere *effect* of the will of the Father [...] His own conception, fashioned in response to his opponents' provocation, is that Father and Son are together constitutive of divine being, and the volitional affirmation of this mutuality by Father and Son simply accompanies their coexistent being and is not in any way posterior to it.'⁸¹

Those who were unable to secure the equality of Father and Son as per Athanasius's arguments above are often judged dogmatically deficient precisely because of a lack of clarity with respect to these questions regarding modality. For example, in his nuanced assessment of whether Eusebius of Caesarea is 'Nicene', Adam Renberg concludes that while Eusebius aims to secure the divinity of the Son and his ontological equality with the Father, he falls short because while he thinks the Son is divine, 'He may not have been. [For Eusebius,] the Father actively wills [the Son's] begetting and thus the Son is contingent upon the Father for his divinity.'⁸² As Renberg concludes, while Eusebius's aim was to affirm the theological judgments of Nicaea, 'the Eusebian focus on the contingent nature of the Son' did not 'adequately protect the Son's divinity.'⁸³

In sum, and as Anatolios argues in another context, central to Athanasius's account of theology and economy is his aim to preserve God's direct rather than mediated involvement in creation and redemption. This involves rejecting any division of God's creative activity from God's nature. Yet he nonetheless aimed strictly to prioritise theology over economy—in part, by distinguishing the modal statuses of the Father's generation of the Son and God's decision to create.⁸⁴ Rowan Williams observes that there are striking ways in which, for all their differences, Barth's account of theology and economy mirrors some key features of Athanasius's.⁸⁵ Both affirm God's freedom and difference from creation by contrasting the necessity of the triune

⁷⁹ Gregory of Nazianzus, *On God and Christ: The Five Theological Orations and Two Letters to Cledonius*, trans. Frederick Williams (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002), Oration 29, 6-7.

⁸⁰ See Athanasius, 'Four Discourses Against the Arians', 3:66.

⁸¹ Khaled Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea: The Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 152 (emphasis added).

⁸² Adam R. Renberg, 'Is Eusebius of Caesarea a "Nicene"? A Contribution to the Notion of Conciliar Theology', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 25, no. 2 (April 2023): 290-311.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 10-11.

⁸⁴ Khaled Anatolios, 'Theology and Economy in Origen and Athanasius', in *Origeniana Septima: Origenes in Den Auseinandersetzungen Des 4. Jahrhunderts*, edited by W.A. Bienert and U. Kühneweg (Leuven: Peeters, 1999), 165-71.

⁸⁵ Admittedly, the unity between Barth and Athanasius with respect to these features of their respective accounts of theology and economy is not particularly unique. Many other figures in the Christian tradition affirm these same features, but nonetheless they stand out rather sharply over against the approach of Jenson and other advocates of the post-Barthian temptation.

relations with the contingency of creation. Yet both likewise unify the divine being and act by locating the divine creative agency, i.e. the Word, within the very nature of God.⁸⁶ All of this suggests, then, that Athanasius, Barth, and a number of other classical figures think the non-reversible distinction between Creator and creature will be severely, perhaps intractably, hampered without distinguishing between the modal status of God's immanent and transitive actions as per advocates of the post-Barthian temptation like Jenson.

In conclusion, I have outlined some of the features of what Bruce McCormack calls the 'post-Barthian temptation', dialoguing with Jenson as an exemplar. I subsequently presented some objections to this trajectory, arguing that it undermines some of the key motivations of Barth's account of theology and economy by denying divine immutability and indifferent creative freedom. The reasons Barth's affirmation of divine immutability and freedom were essential in securing the integrity of creaturely knowledge of God over against the criticisms of Kant and Feuerbach remain important today. We must therefore consider other ways of resolving the lacunae in Barth's account which do not, like the 'post-Barthian temptation', so thoroughly undermine these aspects of Barth's account of theology and economy.

Three Trajectories 'after' Barth which affirm Divine Immutability and Something like Protological Aseity

In what follows I outline three other broad trajectories 'after' Barth which offer a distinctive response to the lacunae related to theology and economy arising in his theology. I treat them collectively because for all their differences, all three aim, unlike the 'post-Barthian temptation', to maintain divine immutability and something at least broadly similar to protological aseity.

The Barthian Catholic Trajectory

The Barthian catholic trajectory⁸⁷ seeks to dissolve the lacunae in Barth's approach to theology and economy by affirming a less 'isomorphic' and more analogical account of the relation between God's life *in se* and *ad extra*, allowing for a more flexible and 'apophatic' understanding of how attributes revealed *ad extra* obtain in God's eternal life. The Barthian catholic trajectory will suspect, with Price's objections cited earlier, that Barth's account cannot sustain this isomorphism anyway.

To outline this trajectory, let us return to the question of the immanent obedience of the Son. For the Barthian catholic, Barth proceeds so quickly from the Son's economic obedience to an inter-triune obedience in the eternal divine life that he fails to appreciate that all of God's acts *ad extra* are perceived under creaturely conditions (as Williams reminded us earlier). Hunsinger therefore asks why the correspondence between time and eternity needs to be such a tight fit?

⁸⁶ Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1987), 238-41.

⁸⁷ I do not suggest other trajectories are outside the bounds of the universal church or cannot draw on traditional insights. This label is fitting because this trajectory more confidently and straightforwardly retrieves historical modes of relating theology and economy. I also select this label because it is employed by critics like McCormack who lament the rise of 'evangelical catholicism.' McCormack, *The Humility of the Eternal Son*, 195; 273-74.

Why isn't the love and freedom of the eternal Trinity a sufficient ground in itself for the Son's self emptying of himself [...] why shouldn't the Son's eternal love for the Father in the Spirit (and their common love for the world) take on this extraordinary form *in extremis*?⁸⁸

For the Barthian catholic, Barth at times lacks a sufficient analogical interval between the predicates applied to Christ's economic existence and their presupposition in God's immanent life.

The foregoing does not require denying Barth's claim that God's acts in the world just *are* God's eternal being in act amongst us. This trajectory often draws on the relation between the triune processions and missions retrieved by Bruce Marshall, Gilles Emery, Matthew Levering, and Thomas Joseph White, amongst others. Marshall, for example, contends that the triune processions and missions are numerically 'one' and thus the unity of theology and economy is affirmed, but nonetheless the missions add a creaturely relation 'to the already constituted' processions.⁸⁹ Thus, the missions just *are* the processions expressed in creation, without the missions bringing to completion the ontological constitution of the processions. If this is the case, as Kathryn Tanner says, and the missions are 'the very *same* relations' as the processions but 'extend into ... the human world of sin and death', this nonetheless entails 'some difference' in the way these relations are perceived.⁹⁰ This recalls Barth's claim that God's act *in se* and *ad extra* is 'the same' but the economic 'form' is distinct. The processions and missions are one act, but the distinction registers that the divine processions extended into time, i.e. the missions, involve creaturely characteristics which will not be isomorphically identical to the way God is in Godself.

Perceiving the immanent God in God's economic acts thus requires what John Webster, drawing on a number of classical sources, calls 'reduction.' Yes, 'The outer works of God are his works, not some remote operation which is not proper to him.' Yet the visible form in which God's transitive acts appear are as creaturely *effects*, and thus our aim is to move 'backwards', identifying what these effects reveal about the divine cause.⁹¹ Insofar as Jesus himself is a *creature*,⁹² he too is an effect, and thus knowing God in Christ requires this same sort of 'reduction.'⁹³ In short, the Barthian catholic trajectory distinguishes between the creaturely aspects or 'form' of God's economic effects and the revelatory 'content' concerning the unchanging being of

⁸⁸ Hunsinger, *Reading Barth with Charity*, 116-17. Despite other differences, in a famous essay Donald MacKinnon suggests that the privations and tragedies befalling Jesus are the 'painfully realised transcription into the conditions of our existence, of the receptivity, the defined, even if frontierless, receptivity that constitutes his person.' Donald M. MacKinnon, 'The Relation of the Doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity', in *Creation, Christ and Culture: Studies in Honour of T. F. Torrance*, ed. Richard McKinney (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1976), 104.

⁸⁹ Bruce Marshall, 'The Unity of the Triune God: Reviving an Ancient Question', *The Thomist* 74, no. 1 (2010): 22.

⁹⁰ Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 180. See also 245.

⁹¹ John Webster, *God Without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology*, Vol. 1 God and the Works of God (London: T&T Clark, 2015), 51.

⁹² Insisting upon this in no way denigrates the importance of Jesus's creaturely history. The very opposite in fact, as Williams suggests: 'paradoxically the denial of a "history" of transactions in God focuses attention on the history of God with us in the world: God has no story but that of Jesus of Nazareth. [...] The existence of Jesus is not an episode in the biography of the Word. It remains obstinately—and crucially—a fact of our world and our world's limits.' Williams, *Arius*, 244.

⁹³ Webster, *God Without Measure*, Vol. 1, 51.

God revealed by tracing back from these economic, created effects to their immanent, uncreated cause.

For the Barthian catholic, this account of the relation between the processions and missions also gives a coherent answer to the lacuna concerning divine freedom and necessity. The divine missions and processions are a single act, and thus there is no divorce between God's actuality *in se* and *ad extra*, but since there are two distinct 'terms'—i.e. God's immanent life and God's temporal acts—these terms can be characterised by distinct modal qualities.⁹⁴ Claiming then that the missions are 'contingent' introduces no instability into our knowledge of God and no grounds for fearing a God behind God who could be different than the God who has revealed Godself. Why? Because (and note the resonances with our dialogue with Athanasius) God is only indifferently free with respect to whether God's unchanging eternal life will extend *ad extra*. God is not indifferently but only spontaneously free with respect to the 'content' of God's immutable triune life, i.e. the processions. There is not even a possibility that God could be different than God has revealed Godself to be on this view. While it is up to God whether and how to create,⁹⁵ who and what God is—and thus what is revealed of God—will be in 'content' immutably the same even if the 'form' could be different (since creation itself could be different). This, because while the mission's 'extension' of the processions is contingent, the processions themselves and thus the content of God's self-revelation is immutably necessary. More would be needed to explicate these claims fully,⁹⁶ but here the Barthian catholic is following closely the trajectory set by Barth himself. 'The freedom to exist which He exercises in His revelation is the same which He has in the depths of His eternal being, and which is proper to Him quite apart from his exercise of it *ad extra*.'⁹⁷ For Barth, the freedom exercised *in se* and *ad extra* is 'the same'; there is one 'divine freedom' not two, but this does not inhibit Barth's further claim that God's freedom *in se* would exist unaltered apart from any productivity *ad extra*. This is consistent with the latter volumes of the dogmatics,⁹⁸ as the identification and 'sameness' of God's life *in se* and *ad extra* is not so undifferentiated as to disallow modal distinction and the priority of God's immanent life over God's economic life.

⁹⁴ McCormack suggests that while Thomas unites the missions and the processions as one act with two terms, the Reformed Scholastics do not. Bruce McCormack, 'Processions and Missions', in *Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth: An Unofficial Catholic-Protestant Dialogue*, edited by Bruce L. McCormack and Thomas Joseph White (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2013), 99-126. See Steven Duby's comprehensive response: Steven Duby, 'Election, Actuality and Divine Freedom', *Modern Theology* 32, no. 3 (July 2016): 325-40. Bruce McCormack also thinks that a single act with two terms cannot allow for modal distinctions between the terms. On the contrary, see Thomas Aquinas, *The 'Summa Theologica' of St Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province [Henceforth ST] (London: R. & T. Washbourne, 1911). I, q.19, a.3. Matthew Levering, 'Christ, the Trinity, and Predestination: McCormack and Aquinas', in *Trinity and Election in Contemporary Theology*, ed. Michael T. Dempsey (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011), 244-76. John Wippel, 'Norman Kretzmann on Aquinas's Attribution of Will and of Freedom to Create to God', *Religious Studies* 39, no. 3 (September 2003): 287-98.

⁹⁵ This sort of language need not imply a crude discursive deliberation in God but is a way of registering the scholastic distinction between God's absolute and the world's merely hypothetical necessity. This distinction is rooted in the difference between God, whose essence and existence are identical and who is pure actuality, and created being.

⁹⁶ See Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Contra Gentiles* [SCG] (New York: Printers to the Holy Apostolic See, 1924), II.10-4. Further, see the articles from Levering and Wippel in footnote 94.

⁹⁷ CD, II/1, 305. Cf. CD, II/2, 155.

⁹⁸ Barth makes nearly the same claim in: CD, III/1, 50.

In sum, the Barthian catholic suggests that Barth should weaken the somewhat isomorphic relation between God's perfection *in se* and *ad extra*, more consistently securing that even if God's revelation *just is* God's eternal being 'present and active among us'⁹⁹ this will nonetheless be under creaturely conditions which require a reduction or tracing back from the nature of the contingent creaturely effect to the—formally—non-identical attributes of the uncreated, necessary cause. While this requires some revision of Barth, Barth himself is inconsistent in his application of this isomorphism.

Some might suggest that given the revisions to Barth suggested above, the Barthian catholic position does not remain *Barthian* in any substantive sense. Bruce Marshall, for example, one of the multiple figures cited within this trajectory, renounced his prior affection for Barth.¹⁰⁰ Yet Marshall's fascinating argument overstates the difference between Barth and some of the elements of the catholic tradition upon which Marshall himself draws.

Marshall's central concern is that Barth claims that 'God has God's being in God's act' or that 'God is what God does' and—while Marshall admits that Barth never explicitly says this—that Barth likewise implies that 'God does not have God's being in God's act.'¹⁰¹ Marshall locates the contradiction as follows:

Barth first says that ... 'God is who he is in his works.' He then says: God 'is also the same in himself, also [the same] before ... his works, also [the same] without them.' For God to 'be who he is,' or to 'have his being,' one assumes, is for him to be, or to have, whatever it takes to be God.¹⁰²

Marshall assumes that if God would possess 'whatever it takes to be God' without the economy, this means that God does not genuinely have God's being in God's act since God would have the same essential being and attributes without God's transitive acts. As an antidote to Barth's approach to theology and economy, Marshall suggests Thomas Aquinas.

Yet Marshall's key objection to Barth, i.e. that Barth equates God's being and act,¹⁰³ is not so different from claims Thomas endorses: 'God does not work by an intermediary action to be regarded as issuing from God and terminating in the creature: but *his action is his substance* and is wholly outside the genus of created being whereby the creature is related to him.'¹⁰⁴ Thomas is here denying that God has two genuinely distinct set of acts, as if the pure actuality of the divine being is different from God's transitive or economic activity (this would imply some sort of 'intermediary action' not identical to the pure actuality of the divine substance, as Thomas said above). This is not an uncommon claim for Thomas: 'the multifarious actions attributed to God, as understanding, willing, producing things, and the like are not diverse realities, since each of these actions in God is His very being.'¹⁰⁵ In short, God's act, including God's transitive acts, are identical to God's being

⁹⁹ John Webster, 'Criticism: Revelation and Disturbance', *Stimulus* 7, no. 1 (1999): 11. Cf. John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 13-15.

¹⁰⁰ This is not overstating the rhetorical tone of both Marshall's original piece and his response to his interlocutors. Bruce Marshall, 'Karl Barth: A Catholic Appraisal', *Pro Ecclesia* 31, no. 4 (November 2022): 504-20. Bruce D. Marshall, 'Reasons to Say Farewell', *Pro Ecclesia* 31, no. 4 (November 2022): 569-84.

¹⁰¹ Marshall, 'Reasons to Say Farewell', 570.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, Marshall cites his translation of KD, II/1, 291.

¹⁰³ Marshall, 'Karl Barth: A Catholic Appraisal', 508.

¹⁰⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones Disputatae de Potentia: On the Power of God*, trans. English Dominican Fathers (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1952), q.7, a.10 (emphasis added).

¹⁰⁵ Aquinas, SCG, s II.10.

for Thomas. Yet how then can Thomas consistently affirm that God would be immutably the same *without* God's transitive acts? Note, Thomas's claims raise the same question which Marshall thinks problematically afflicts Barth's approach, suggesting that Barth and Thomas might not be as opposed with respect to these matters as Marshall supposes. Thomas's answer would take a good deal of time to exposit, and has been explicated at length elsewhere,¹⁰⁶ but it is, in short, precisely because of what Thomas went on to say in the initial citation: God is outside the genus of created being or, as he will say in other places, 'God is outside the whole order of creation, and all creatures are ordered to Him, and not conversely.'¹⁰⁷ For Thomas, God's pure actuality can be identical to God's transitive acts without those acts 'adding' something which would have been lacking in God's essential being and attributes apart from them, because of the qualitative distinction between God and creatures. God is not further or additionally actualised by God's transitive acts, nor does God gain new perfections by acting transitively, because God's will is infinitely actualised just by being God—i.e. by willing God's own goodness and communicating this goodness via the triune processions.¹⁰⁸ The infinite dynamism of the divine being can be present and productive in the world in God's economic acts, producing changes in *creatures*, without changing or further actualising God. This can be the case, because the infinite act of willing God's own essence and communicating God's essence via the triune relations is metaphysically incommensurable with God's finite transitive acts. This allows Thomas to affirm precisely what both Marshall and I agree Barth is aiming to say even if Marshall (incorrectly in my view) thinks it generates a contradiction: God has God's being in God's act in that there are not genuinely two different acts in God, which would imply that theology and economy are divided, and yet because of the qualitative distinction between God and creatures and thus between God's immanent and economic productivity, God would not be in any sense less perfect or less actual if God had not acted transitively.¹⁰⁹ Therefore, God can have God's being in God's act even if nonetheless God would, to use Marshall's terms, have all that is required to be God without acting transitively.

I worry that Marshall loses sight of these Thomistic convictions in his Thomas-inspired criticisms of Barth. He objects that for Barth 'God simply has no being other than his temporal being for us.'¹¹⁰ Yet Thomas agrees. There is only one divine being, not two. To affirm a genuine 'temporal' or 'economic' divine *being* different from God's being of pure actuality is a denial of Thomas's doctrine of divine simplicity,

¹⁰⁶ Jared Michelson, 'Thomistic Divine Simplicity and Its Analytic Detractors: Can One Affirm Divine Aseity and Goodness without Simplicity?', *The Heythrop Journal* 63, no. 6 (2022): 1140–62. See also W. Matthews Grant and Mark K. Spencer, 'Activity, Identity, and God: A Tension in Aquinas and His Interpreters', *Studia Neoscholastica* 12, no. 2 (January 2015): 5–61. W. Matthews Grant, 'Must a Cause Be Really Related to Its Effect? The Analogy between Divine and Libertarian Agent Causality', *Religious Studies* 43, no. 1 (2007): 1–23. W. Matthews Grant, 'Aquinas, Divine Simplicity, and Divine Freedom', *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 77 (January 2003): 129–44.

¹⁰⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *ST*, I, q.13, a.7.

¹⁰⁸ e.g. Aquinas, *SCG*, II.12–13; Aquinas, *De Potentia* II.1; Aquinas, *ST*, I, q.9, a.15; Aquinas, *SCG*, I.81.

¹⁰⁹ See footnote 103 for further explication of this aspect of Thomas's position.

¹¹⁰ Marshall, 'Karl Barth: A Catholic Appraisal', 508.

positing (at least) two different acts in God rather than a single, infinite, *actus purus*.¹¹¹ Stated in terms of the triune relations, for Thomas the fact that the temporal mission of the Son does not add some additional *actus* to the Son's divine existence which would be lacking apart from it does not imply that there are two divine beings proper to the second person of the Trinity and thus two Sons.

Barth agrees that the economy does not 'add' anything to God, even if he fails to see the potential resource Thomas offers for clarifying his intentions. Barth insists that God's transitive activity, including the incarnation, 'adds nothing to Him', it 'does not make Him richer', and 'He might just as well do without' it.¹¹² How can Barth affirm this while still affirming that God has God's being in God's act? Perhaps it is because Barth, like Aquinas, affirms that God is not in a genus¹¹³ and, further, he affirms an infinite qualitative distinction between God and creatures. The transitive acts of the Son in time mirror the infinite being of the Son. Further, insofar as the Son's acts are acts of God, they *are* the single, fully actual divine being present and active in the world. Yet because God and creation are infinitely qualitatively distinct, the Son is not 'more' the Son than he would have been without creation. Creation is not accidental to the Son in that his acts in time are 'the same' as his eternal relation to the father, i.e. the missions *are* the processions, but they do not ontologically augment the processions, adding some perfection which would be lacking without them. This would imply that the distinction between Creator and creature is not, as Barth would have it, infinite and qualitative but is, even if exceedingly large, nonetheless finite and quantitative.

I have not claimed that Barth is always consistent with respect to these matters or that his language is always clear (it is not). Nor would I aim to minimise the many disagreements between Thomas and Barth. Likewise, I have agreed that the Barthian catholic, like the other post-Barthian interpretations we have cited, reinterprets Barth's position to some degree. Nonetheless, dialoguing with Marshall's argument provides an example of why the Barthian catholic trajectory I have outlined remains within the orbit of Barth's fundamental convictions regarding theology and economy. Clarifying Barth's view of theology and economy with figures like Thomas or Athanasius does not require (as Marshall suggests) that the 'premise' of Barth's

¹¹¹ Questions might arise here related to discussions amongst various medieval theologians and disagreements amongst Thomistic interpreters regarding whether there is one or two beings in Christ, or, even if one affirms a single *esse* in Christ, what this means for the two natures. See for example Aaron Riches, *Ecce Homo: On the Divine Unity of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016), 155-76. Richard Cross, *The Metaphysics of the Incarnation: Thomas Aquinas to Duns Scotus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). These matters need not detain us, for despite the variety of views surveyed in the foregoing works, none of these views would posit an economic *divine* being which is distinguished from an immanent divine being.

¹¹² CD, IV/2, 791. See also: CD, IV/1, 212-13.

¹¹³ CD, II/1, 447. Thomas, ST, I, q.3, a.5.

doctrine of God, i.e. 'the equation of God's being with his act', be rejected.¹¹⁴ In fact, Thomas's account can be used to clarify Barth's statements and secure his consistent intention to affirm that revelation just *is* God's eternal being in act but that nonetheless God would be no *less* without it.

The Barthian Balthasarian Trajectory

While the Barthian catholic trajectory provides compelling answers to the lacunae in Barth's approach to theology and economy, some will be unhappy with the revisions it requires to Barth. For example, to distinguish consistently between the form and content of God's self-revelation, we need some criteria by which to distinguish between created and uncreated. For Katherine Sonderegger,¹¹⁵ this requires a chastening of Barth's strict epistemological prioritising of Christology.¹¹⁶ If one comes to know God through his self-revelation in the *creaturely* history of Jesus, one must employ knowledge of the Creator-creature distinction gained by other means—perhaps from the doctrine of creation, Old Testament theophanies, or, as some Barthians will fear, natural theology—to distinguish between the 'creaturely form' and 'immanent content' of God's self-revelation in Christ. For those wishing to maintain, in contrast to the Barthian catholic, the somewhat isomorphic relation of theology and economy, Barthian Balthasarianism will be an attractive trajectory. Our paradigm for this trajectory is, unsurprisingly, Balthasar himself.

A version of the Barthian Balthasarian trajectory contends that Barth *should* have predicated suffering of the immanent divine life, just as he has with grace, obedience, the overcoming of antitheses, and other 'lowly' predicates. This might be accomplished by extending the way in which Barth speaks of the triune relations as acts of elective,¹¹⁷ self-denying agapic love¹¹⁸ in a radical Balthasarian direction. For this trajectory, the self-denying, kenotic, triune gift of self from one trinitarian hypostasis to another in the eternal divine life should be glossed as something like an eternal suffering-love which serves as the presupposition for God's suffering in time.¹¹⁹

[The] Father, in an eternal 'super-Kenosis' makes himself 'destitute' of all that he is and can be so as to bring forth a consubstantial divinity, the Son. Everything that

¹¹⁴ Marshall, 'Reasons to Say Farewell', 572. Marshall raises another objection to the Barthian catholic position, suggesting that it is impossible to reject that subordination is an aspect of the Son's immanent relation to the Father while maintaining Barth's key insight that God's being is in God's act. I affirm Marshall's criticisms of the immanent subordination of the Son. However, I have demonstrated in the foregoing that Barth affirms in various places that the 'form' in which God exists economically is 'alien' to the form in which God exists in God's self. Therefore, while I agree that Barth is not consistent in certain regards, Marshall is incorrect to suggest that there is no way of maintaining Barth's premise that God's being is in God's act while rejecting the immanent obedience of the Son. One can modify Barth by treating the economic obedience of the Son similarly to the way Barth himself treats the economic suffering of the Son, seeing it as the form which the Son's impassible, non-hierarchical, immanent relation to the Father takes *ad extra* (see the prior citations from Hunsinger and MacKinnon in footnote 88).

¹¹⁵ See for example Sonderegger, *Systematic Theology*, 1:xvii.

¹¹⁶ I say 'epistemological' because there is no reason this need undermine an ontological Christocentrism, but the Barthian catholic view is consistent with the belief that created natures are dependent upon and presupposed in the Word who is the image and wisdom of the Father.

¹¹⁷ CD, IV/2, 766.

¹¹⁸ CD, IV/2, 733; 755-57.

¹¹⁹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale*, trans. Aidan Nichols (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990), vii-viii.

can be thought and imagined where God is concerned is in advance, included and transcended in this self-destitution which constitutes the person of the Father, and, at the same time, those of the Son and the Spirit [...] God, then, has no need to 'change' [...] For] the contingent 'abasements' of God in the economy of salvation are forever included and outstripped in the eternal event of love.¹²⁰

Balthasar's proposals here are in dialogue with Barth's KD IV/1, wherein Balthasar read that the self-emptying and abasement of Christ in time is neither a divestment nor a denial of immutability but a confirmation of the Son's eternal Godhead.¹²¹ Barth's account of the agapic, self-denying, and gracious inter-triune love gives a hint of how Barth might think the abasement of the Son *ad extra* reflects his eternal being. Balthasar radicalises these insights.¹²²

Barthian Balthasarianism gives content to the lowly attributes which are difficult to ground in the eternal triune life, locating these attributes in the self-emptying drama of inter-trinitarian kenosis. This trajectory therefore secures the key features of Barth's account of the relation between theology and economy: an isomorphic account of the predicates applied to God *in se* and *ad extra*, divine immutability,¹²³ protological aseity, and the principle of antecedent readiness, for as Balthasar says:

God did not need this otherness of the world and man [...] For everything that the creature seems to offer Him—its otherness, its being in antithesis to Himself [...] He has also in Himself as God [...] In superfluity—we have to say this because we are in fact dealing with an overflowing, not with a filling up of the perfection of God which needs no filling.¹²⁴

The Barthian Balthasarian will further appeal to an account of the relation between the processions and missions not unlike that of the Barthian catholic trajectory.¹²⁵ For Balthasar, while 'the economic Trinity assuredly appears as the interpretation of the immanent Trinity, it may not be identified with it, for the latter grounds and supports the former.'¹²⁶ Similar to Barth's antecedent readiness, God's economic life 'mirrors'¹²⁷ the eternal triune life, in that the Son immutably corresponds to God¹²⁸ in his mission to the world without this mission being either necessary or disconnected from who God is in Godself.¹²⁹ For one hoping to rehabilitate Barth's account of theology and economy, the Barthian Balthasarian trajectory represents the least reconstructive approach.

Yet the Barthian Balthasarian trajectory is faced with a dilemma. On the one hand, if one consistently maintains an isomorphic relation between predicates applied *in se*

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, viii-ix; 28-9. Cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, trans. Graham Harrison, 5 vols. (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1988), II, 518-19; IV, 319-28.

¹²¹ Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale*, 79-82.

¹²² See also Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, III, 518-9.

¹²³ Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, V, 502.

¹²⁴ CD, IV/1, 201. Cf. CD, IV/2, 346-48.

¹²⁵ See for example Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, III, 156-7; 505-7; 529.

¹²⁶ Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, III, 507. Cf. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, V, 173.

¹²⁷ Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, III, 505.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 523.

¹²⁹ Brandon Gallaher critiques Balthasar precisely for this affirmation. See Gallaher, *Freedom and Necessity in Modern Trinitarian Theology*, 220-23; 237-38.

and *ad extra*, one must affirm that the triune God is eternally afflicted by suffering. For many, this will represent an untoward disruption of the peace and blessedness of the divine life. Yet on the other hand, one might reject this isomorphism and strongly emphasise that the erotic, self-denying triune relations can be spoken of in terms of 'suffering', 'self-denying' love only *analogically*. This is Balthasar's own view: 'all apparently negative things in the *oikonomia* can be traced back to, and explained by, positive things in the *theologia*.'¹³⁰ Yet, as Gilles Emery argues, in this case it is difficult to see what is gained by *analogically* predicating suffering of the eternal divine life in the first place. If all elements of privation, finitude, and lack are to be eliminated, what content is left to the claim that this eternal triune love is actually a *suffering* love rather than mere *love*?¹³¹ Why not—as Hunsinger suggested in the quotation above¹³²—merely contend that blessed divine charity, when confronted with sinful and suffering creatures, is liable to express itself as it actually has in Christ by suffering for the sake of the other? The same issue arises with the other lowly predicates. In the case of eternal divine suffering, eternal inter-triune grace, or an eternal trinitarian antithesis overcome by the Spirit, if one interprets these predicates isomorphically, this implies an unending trauma in the divine life which is ongoingly but never definitively overcome. On the other hand, one could interpret these claims analogically and strip away all elements of privation, but in this case, the distinction between the immanent and the economic form of suffering, grace, and the overcoming of antitheses is, as Price suggested earlier, *more* 'nominalistic' than claiming that mercy, grace, or suffering love are particular exemplifications of divine goodness under the conditions of creaturely life (as for Thomas Aquinas¹³³). The Barthian Balthasarian's attempt to maintain Barth's 'isomorphism' paradoxically posits a gap between the way God is in Godself and the way God appears *ad extra* which could potentially be seen as even more pronounced than the Barthian catholic approach.

In sum, the 'Balthasarian' interpretation consists in a less invasive reinterpretation of Barth's account of theology and economy.¹³⁴ However, this response tends either to posit an unending history of overcoming, suffering, and self-denial in God, or to use those terms in such a strained sense that one appears merely as a Barthian catholic with a penchant for exaggeration.

The Barthian Revisionist Trajectory

Finally, there is the Barthian revisionist trajectory. My exemplar of this trajectory is Bruce McCormack. McCormack's perspective on theology and economy has spawned a number of not uncritical followers and has developed in ongoing dialogue with Barth,

¹³⁰ Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, V, 516. Cf. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, V, 173; 502-3.

¹³¹ Emery, 'The Immutability of the God of Love', 58.

¹³² Hunsinger, *Reading Barth with Charity*, 116-17.

¹³³ Aquinas, *ST*, I, q.21, a.4.

¹³⁴ One might further examine the deleterious ethical implications of this claim that even perfect love inherently involves suffering.

culminating most recently in a monograph on Christology.¹³⁵ His current understanding of theology and economy, while daring in its originality and scope, can be stated in outline rather briefly.

For McCormack, God is constituted by God's eternal decision that the second person of the Trinity be 'ontologically receptive' to the human life of Jesus Christ. Since God is constituted in virtue of this *eternal* decision, God is constituted protologically. McCormack is intent to secure both divine immutability and something vaguely reminiscent of Barth's account of protological aseity—even if the principle of antecedence and protological *aseity* are severely undermined since the economy is 'brought in' to protology, so to speak, and made ontologically constitutive of God. While, for McCormack, God determines Godself in election, there is nothing temporally or metaphysically prior to or behind this decision. Therefore, without any change or evolution in the divine being, the Son is eternally constituted by his immutable, ontological reception of the creaturely history of Jesus.¹³⁶ Since the eternal Son is essentially constituted by the lived history of Jesus of Nazareth, an isomorphic relation obtains. Much of this is in sharp contrast to the post-Barthian temptation, but McCormack agrees that no sense can be made of the claim that God could exist apart from God's election to create and redeem in Christ.¹³⁷

There are some obstacles facing Barthian revisionism. In collapsing the modal status of God's self-affirming decision and God's decision to be for us in Jesus, McCormack is unable to say that God's decision to be for us could be otherwise, but nor does he straightforwardly say that this act is necessary.

I have already argued that to refuse to maintain that God's decision to create and redeem is contingent undermines Barth's central response to the challenges for theological knowledge arising in early modernity. To refuse to affirm that God could exist without diminution apart from creation raises the spectre of a reversibility between God's immanent acts and transitive effects, since it does not adequately distinguish between the sort of freedom pertaining to God's immanent and transitive acts. We will not rehearse these arguments again.

¹³⁵ Bruce McCormack, 'God Is His Decision: The Jünger-Gollwitzer "Debate" Revisited', in *Theology as Conversation*, edited by Bruce McCormack and Kimlyn Bender (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 48–66. Bruce McCormack, 'The Actuality of God: Karl Barth in Conversation with Open Theism', in *Engaging the Doctrine of God: Contemporary Protestant Perspectives*, ed. Bruce L. McCormack (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 185–244. Bruce L. McCormack, *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 183–277. Alexandra Pârvan and Bruce L. McCormack, 'Immutability, (Im)Passibility and Suffering: Steps towards a "Psychological" Ontology of God', *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 59, no. 1 (2017): 1–25. McCormack, *The Humility of the Eternal Son*.

¹³⁶ McCormack, *The Humility of the Eternal Son*, 271.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 281. See also Pârvan and McCormack, 'Immutability, (Im)Passibility and Suffering', 18–19. T. Adam van Wart worries that McCormack (and this objection could apply to Jenson as well) begs the question against objectors when arguing that he need not choose whether God's transitive acts are necessary or contingent since our normal notions of necessity and contingency should not be applied to God but should be reconstituted by attention to revelation. Van Wart notes that simply *asserting* that one should attend to God's self-revelation rather than applying creaturely concepts of necessity and contingency to God threatens to make theological language meaningless. If our claims about God—imperfect, metaphorical or analogical though they may be—are to make sense, they must be governed by ordered grammatical and logical rules. Unless some new definition of contingency and necessity is offered in view of what we learn about these concepts from attention to revelation—and van Wart rightly notes that such definitions are never offered by McCormack—then McCormack is in danger of making theology a sort of private language game whose rules are largely opaque. T. Adam van Wart, *Neither Nature Nor Grace: Aquinas, Barth, and Garrigou-Lagrange on the Epistemic Use of God's Effects* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2020), 168–83.

Yet an equally concerning worry arises when McCormack refuses straightforwardly to state that God's ontologically constitutive decision is necessary. McCormack identifies God's self-determining decision to be God with his decision to be for us in Jesus, and says this single decision is—ambiguously—'contingently necessary and necessarily contingent'.¹³⁸ I suspect McCormack has struggled to face up to the radical consequences of this view. He explains: 'The only thing that is absolutely necessary for God is existence itself, but such a consideration may not be abstracted from the decision in which God gives to himself his own being and then played off against that which is contingently necessary for him [like election].'¹³⁹ I appreciate why McCormack finds it difficult to give up the belief that God's existence is necessary in some absolute, unmitigated sense. However, his distinction between the 'absolute' necessity of divine existence and the contingent necessity of election is inconsistent with his broader account of God's elective self-determination. He insists that nothing is temporally, logically, or metaphysically more basic than election.¹⁴⁰ If God's existence *as such* is absolutely necessary in a way in which God's ontologically constitutive decision is not, then a level of contingency and instability is introduced into the Trinity and divine attributes. In this case, the Trinity and divine attributes are constituted by a *merely* contingently necessary decision, unlike other aspects of God which are necessary in some stronger, 'absolute' sense. If this is not the case, then what sense can be made of this distinction between 'absolute' and 'contingent' forms of necessity? McCormack's distinction between absolute necessity and merely contingent necessity thereby raises—against his intention—the spectre of a *Deus absconditus*, positing a form of divine existence more ontologically basic than God's loving, triune existence. Even if McCormack revised this claim and affirmed that every aspect of God—including the divine existence—is merely contingently necessary, this still fails to secure the absolute correspondence between the divine being and act which divine immutability secures for Barth.

Insofar as McCormack refuses to say that God's ontological constitution 'could not be otherwise', his affirmation of divine immutability is left 'hanging in the air' (as we quoted Barth as saying earlier). If one cannot say that God's essential constitution 'could not be otherwise'—remember, McCormack denies the validity of this way of thinking altogether—then one cannot affirm that God 'cannot change', and thus one cannot *really* affirm divine immutability in any robust sense. McCormack is highly sensitive to the function of divine immutability in Barth's response to the early modern critics of theological knowledge¹⁴¹ and his revisionary proposal is motivated in part by the aim of securing divine immutability over-against the post-Barthian temptation. As he insists we must 'have complete confidence that God will never turn out to be anything other than the God of electing grace'.¹⁴² However, his failure to secure a robust account of divine immutability leaves in place precisely what Barth fears, the possibility of an instability in our knowledge of God as God reveals Godself to be, which reintroduces the spectre of a *Deus absconditus*. Barth's account of theology and economy depends upon this claim that 'in the condescension in which He gives Himself to us in Jesus Christ He

¹³⁸ McCormack, 'Processions and Missions', 120-21.

¹³⁹ McCormack, *Orthodox and Modern*, 266.

¹⁴⁰ See for example McCormack, *Orthodox and Modern*, 265. Bruce McCormack, 'Election and the Trinity: Theses in Response to George Hunsinger', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 63, no. 2 (May 2010): 206.

¹⁴¹ See for example McCormack, 'Divine Impassability or Simply Divine Constancy'.

¹⁴² McCormack, *Orthodox and Modern*, 90.

exists and speaks and acts as the One He was from all eternity and *will be* to all eternity.¹⁴³

My objections have circled round questions about the possibility of knowing God raised by early modern philosophical critics. But there is a simpler, evangelical reason why Barth's account of theology and economy should lead us to question Barthian revisionism (and likewise the approach of Jenson and other proponents of the post-Barthian temptation). McCormack¹⁴⁴ thinks this question of whether God would be the 'same' apart from his decision to determine Godself as the man Jesus of Nazareth involves an inappropriately speculative style of metaphysical thinking.¹⁴⁵ In contrast, for Barth such a question is not a matter of speculative metaphysics but evangelical conviction. If for Barth God used the world to become the perfect God who loves in freedom, then God would relate to the world out of need rather than free grace, using creation to become Godself. It is instead *out of*, or in an overflow of the 'fulness of God's divine being'—in his 'self-sufficiency', 'tri-unity', and the breadth of the divine perfections—that God turns to be *pro nobis*. Only this secures the gratuitous freedom of divine grace.¹⁴⁶ Barth's belief in the correspondence between God's act *in se* and *ad extra*, alongside his belief in the gratuity of the economy, is precisely why Barth thinks the relation between theology and economy must be characterised by the principle of antecedence or readiness. It is this aspect of Barth's account that is most thoroughly rejected by Barthian revisionism, since God is not antecedently 'ready' for the economy but rather the economy is included in God's very decision to be God in that it determines the Son's being. As Barth states in CD IV/2, 'Even the fact that God wills to be our God [...] is free grace', which means 'God, who is completely self-sufficient [...] does not need a fellow in order to be love, or a companion in order to be complete'.¹⁴⁷

In conclusion, Barthian revisionism is an ingenious solution to the challenges for relating theology and economy arising 'after' Barth. However, like the post-Barthian temptation, it fails to secure precisely what Barth thought to be central to his account of theology and economy in the first place: the absolute correspondence between theology and economy, grounded in God's immutability and freedom. Further, it is unable to secure the gratuity which Barth thinks characterises the Gospel.

Conclusion

In sum, there is a lacuna related to Barth's insufficiently perspicuous distinction between the form and content of revelation. There is a related lacuna concerning the modality respectively pertaining to God's self-affirming decision to be God and God's decision to create and redeem. I began objecting to the post-Barthian temptation because it failed to secure the unity but non-reversibility between God's being *in se* and acts *ad extra* which are secured by divine immutability and freedom. I proceeded to describe three trajectories 'after' Barth which seek to take on board some of the fundamental features of his account of theology and economy while nonetheless revising it to resolve the lacunae we noted. The Barthian Balthasarian strips the

¹⁴³ CD, IV/1, 193 (emphasis added).

¹⁴⁴ McCormack, 'Processions and Missions', 122.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ CD, IV/1, 39.

¹⁴⁷ CD, IV/2, 791. Cf. CD, II/1, 499-500.

lowly predicates applied to God's immanent life of definitive content or posits an unending trauma which is continually but never finally overcome in the eternal divine life (one might think this is a danger for McCormack as well, since for McCormack the Son is eternally and immutably receptive of the entire lived history of Jesus of Nazareth, including the passion). The Barthian revisionist fails ultimately to secure divine immutability and freedom and undercuts the gratuity of grace. The Barthian catholic approach is the most dogmatically promising route forward, even if questions remain.

It might be helpful to note one additional salutary aspect of the Barthian catholic trajectory for relating theology and economy. The Barthian catholic affirms something like Barth's account of God's antecedent readiness (*Bereitschaft*)¹⁴⁸ for the economy, but Barth's way of framing divine readiness can at times unintentionally suggest that it is only insofar as God is *like* creatures that God is antecedently prepared to relate to them. This is the rationale for Barth's predication of the lowly predicates to God's immanent triune life. This tendency is radicalised in each of the possible trajectories 'after' Barth we identified, except the Barthian catholic. When the Barthian catholic brings Barth's insights about theology and economy into the bracing, open air of the wider catholic tradition, the opposite conviction begins to arise. God is antecedently 'ready' to be comprehensively and intimately *for us* because of the radical nature of the Creator-creature distinction.

God does not need creaturely qualities to engage with creation. God is comprehensively involved in every space not because he is spatial but because he is not.¹⁴⁹ God is related to every particular nature, not because God is a particular thing over against other things, but because God—as both Aquinas and Barth agree—does not reside in any genus.¹⁵⁰ And most of all, God is entirely and without reserve for us not because God needs us in order to be Godself but because God does not.¹⁵¹ In short, it is only because God is so unlike us that God is ready to be without reserve *for us*. While I have worried that in practice Barth at times struggles to secure some of these insights, few articulate this fundamental conviction with more force. Therefore, it is fitting to close with some of the electrifying words which initiated his theological protest and enduring influence: 'No divinity which NEEDS ANYTHING, any human propaganda (Acts xvii. 24, 25),—can be God. God is the unknown God, and, precisely because He is unknown, He bestows life and breath and all things.'¹⁵²

¹⁴⁸ Cf. KD, II/1, 68.

¹⁴⁹ Ian A. McFarland, *From Nothing: A Theology of Creation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 59.

¹⁵⁰ Kathryn Tanner, 'Creation Ex Nihilo as Mixed Metaphor', *Modern Theology* 29, no. 2 (April 2013): 138-55.

¹⁵¹ John Webster, 'Non Ex Aequo', in *Within the Love of God*, edited by Anthony Clarke and Andrew Moore (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 95-107.

¹⁵² Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 35-36. Thanks to Oliver Crisp, Alden McCray, Timothy Baylor, two anonymous reviewers from *Modern Theology*, and the theology seminar at the University of St Andrews who provided indispensable feedback on this piece.