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# “GOD IN HIMSELF” AND “GOD AS REVEALED TO US”: THE IMPACT OF THE *SUBSTANCE CONCEPT*

## ABSTRACT

The static space metaphysics of the Eleatic school (Parmenides) is continued by Plato, Aristotle and subsequently followed up by Thomas Aquinas. Concurrently a negative theological approach surfaced, claiming that one can only say what God is *not*. It runs from Plato's dialogue *Parmenides* and is continued via the Cappadocians, Plotinus, Pseudo-Dionysius and certain elements in the thought of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. What is *constant* is elevated into the *unknowable essence* of God. There are two options. The first option (theo-ontologically) duplicates (accommodates) the creational diversity into the communicable (appearance) part of God — as the counter-pole of the *esse(nce)* part (namely “God-in-Himself”). In the second option, still as the counter-pole of the *esse(nce)* part (namely “God-in-Himself”), God accommodated Himself to the creational diversity in order to explain the “appearance” (revelation) of God to creatures. The distinction between conceptual knowledge and concept-transcending knowledge provides an alternative approach.

## 1. ORIENTATION

Although it almost seems self-evident, in terms of a biblical perspective, to affirm God's transcendence of creation, the history of theoretical reflection on God and on the way in which one ought to speak of God makes it plain that the issue is far from simple. During the early medieval period Christian theology explored important elements of the ancient Greek view regarding the “Origin” of the universe (cosmos). Even our reformed theological tradition is so much indebted to Greek philosophy that Bavinck had to remark that although Greek philosophy is not Christian, it is suitable for an explanation of the nature God and God's revelation. Perhaps the most significant and influential element in this Greek legacy is found in its *substance concept*.

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## 2. THE CONCEPT OF SUBSTANCE IN ANCIENT GREEK PHILOSOPHY

The striking changefulness and corruptibility of the cosmos inspired early Greek philosophers to search for their principle of origin in the everflowing stream of life — found in elements such as water (Thales), fire (Heraclitus) and air (Anaximenes). Anaximander (5<sup>th</sup> century BC) occupies a more ambiguous position in this regard, for while calling the *Archè* the unbounded-infinite (the *apeiron*), he also holds that the *apeiron* is not subject to change. The elements of water, fire and air were thought of as *flowing, dynamic principles of origin*, because at this early stage in Greek thought, the motive of *form, measure and harmony* played a subordinate role. Solmsen explains that Anaximander is the only thinker “for whom the *apeiron* itself was the enduring and all-encompassing entity” (Solmsen 1962:114). Sweeney mentions that the *Archè* of Anaximander is “by nature the Infinite, the Boundless, the Limitless” (Sweeney 1972:65). According to Anaximander, the *to apeiron* “is indeterminate, inexhaustible, everlasting, untraversable, and without any extrinsic limit” (Sweeney 1972:62). Yet, at the same time, Anaximander claims that the *apeiron* is *without ageing* (Diels-Kranz B Fr.2) and *without death and corruptibility* (Diels-Kranz B Fr.3).

The underlying *unity* of the *Archè* reveals itself in multiple changing forms which are doomed to return to their formless origin (cf. Anaximander’s B Fr.1). The order (limited form) represents the repressed form motive which is, in its dialectically depreciated meaning, the source of punishable injustice (*adikias*). The dialectical tension between *form* and *matter, constancy and change*, is implied by the reciprocal determination of these two opposing principles of origin. For that reason disqualifying order (and therefore constancy) in B Fr.1 does not escape from order because, in the quoted Fragments, the *Archè* is regarded as everlasting, without ageing, death and corruptibility, and therefore as *constant*. Philalaos, a follower of Pythagoras, views the world order as consisting of the *limitless* and the *limited* (B Fr.1).

The discovery of irrational numbers uprooted the initial claims of the Pythagoreans, namely that *everything is number* and caused a shift to a different principle of explanation. Since the Pythagoreans were thus confronted, within the form-giving function of number, with the unbounded-infinite, they translated all their arithmetical problems into spatial terms (surely, any spatial figure has a definite and limited form). The geometrical handling of irrational numbers gave rise to a fundamental geometrisation of Greek mathematics. This outcome not only received its central motivation and direction from the basic

motive of *matter* and *form*,<sup>1</sup> but also laid the foundation for a *space metaphysics* that exerted a decisive influence on subsequent reflections on the way in which theology accounted for the essence and revelation of God.

As the new principle of explanation, Parmenides explored space in his static philosophy of being. Parmenides considers the only road to truth to be via the theorem that whatever is *is*, since non-being (*mè eon*) is neither knowable nor expressible (B Fr.2). The terms used by Parmenides to characterise the nature of *being* are derived from the perspective of the spatial aspect of reality. As hallmarks of being, the following are mentioned: since it is unborn it is imperishable (cf. Anaximander's B Fr.2 and Fr.3), ... it was not and will never be because in its hanging together it is as an indivisible whole given in the present — unified, coherent (B Fr.8, 3-6). On the basis of his identification of *thought* and *being* Parmenides views being as a non-sensory sphere, comparable to the body of a many-sided, well-curved ball. Empedocles abandoned the *unity of being* by introducing *four* immutable ontic forms, namely *fire*, *earth*, *air* and *water*. According to Aristotle, he treats them as *two*: *fire* on the one hand and *earth*, *air* and *water* together on the other (cf. *Metaph.* 985 b 1-3). This separation correlated love (*philia*) and animosity (*neikos*) as two opposing soul forces assumed by Empedocles. The fluid divine nature of *philia*, in opposition to *neikos* as non-divine soul force (cf. D-K, Fr. 59), is not bound to any fixed form; this shows how the Orphic dualism reveals itself within the primacy of the matter motive. The matter motive is also only partially de-devised, that is, in connection with the *neikos*.

Assigning primacy to the form motive is only found in the thought of Anaxagoras who was the first to position the *nous* as ruler over matter. According to Anaxagoras, the *nous* is not determined by any limits; it is not intermingled with germs of matter, and it alone is self-sufficient, for itself. Because the opening words of B Fragment 12 solely call the *nous* pure (un-mixed), it follows that the *spermata* (resp. *chremata*) (cf. B Fr. 1,4) cannot be (pure and) un-mixed. This was apparently also implied by Anaxagoras in Fr. 6, 11 and 12 regarding the mixture of everything with everything — a disorderly mixture of formless matter germs. The *nous*, that is eternal (B Fr. 14), would not have had (autonomous) dominion over disordered matter germs if it was intermingled with them.

In the conviction of Anaxagoras, namely that the *nous* can only know something if it does not participate in it and rule over it, we find a remarkable *epistemological* elaboration of the primacy of the form motive. At once the de-

1 Although Bos questions the way in which Dooyeweerd accounts for the genesis of the motive of form and matter, and prefers to speak of the titanic meaning perspective, he believes that the extensive analysis of the development of this motive in Dooyeweerd (1949) (see Dooyeweerd 2004) contains a valid perspective on the inherent dialectic of Greek thought (see Bos 1994:220).

divinisation of the rigid, motionless and disorderly matter germs (as a continuous mixture of everything with everything) is clear from the fact that only the *nous* is called *divine* — contrary to all the rest.

However, both Plato and Aristotle had to come to terms with the striking problem in the thought of Heraclitus. From Heraclitus Plato learned that all things accessible to sensory perception are in an *ever-fluctuating state*. It is therefore impossible to *know* these things, the moment the claim is made that something is known; it already changed into something different and is therefore *not* known. Heraclitus believed that one cannot step into the same river twice.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, knowledge needs something “non-changing” to hold on to — an assumption that led Plato to the development of his theory of ideal (supra-sensory) *static ontic forms* (ideas). Only human knowledge has access to this realm, whereas the world of genesis (becoming) reflects what Heraclitus claimed as the only reality — *constant flux*.

In the dialogue *Cratylus*<sup>3</sup> presented a direct *dreamed-of* pre-design of the theory of ideas. As *in-themselves-resting*, supra-sensory ontic forms these ideas enable knowledge in respect of subject and object (see *Cratylus* 411 c and 439 e-440 a). Probably with this in mind Aristotle mentions that in his youth Plato did get acquainted with the doctrines of Heraclitus according to which all perceivable (sensory) things prevail in a state of flux, such that no knowledge of them is possible (*Metaph.* 987 a 30). The problem unveiled in this instance by Plato concerns the relation between what endures and what changes. Plato accounted for the apparent discrepancy between *constancy* and *change* with his theory of ideas mentioned earlier. He argues that if the *essential being* of something (its *αὐτὸ τὸ εἶδος*) of what is known changed into another *eidōs* no knowledge (to subject and object) will be possible (*Cratylus*, 440 a-b). In the dialogue *Gorgias* we encounter the same problem. Why do you call the good good? Socrates asks Callicles; is it not through the presence of the good, just as you call those people beautiful in which beauty is present? (*Gorgias* 497 e).

The Orphic-Pythagorean mood of Plato’s dialogue *Phaido* is particularly obvious from the central role assigned to the proofs of the immortality and indestructibility of the *soul* in it. In the epistemological addition to the first main argument regarding the immortality of the soul, the nature of knowledge acquisition is viewed as a process of recollection of what we already have known before our present existence — that would have been impossible if the soul did not have an existence before its current shape. Therefore the soul must be immortal (*Phaido* 72 e-73 a). In this context the conversation leader mentions realities in-themselves such as the *similar itself*, *beauty itself*, the *good itself*, the *righteous*

2 Since the river is never the same one cannot step into the same river even once (see Freeman 1949:285).

3 *Cratylus* was a pupil of Heraclitus.

and *pious*, and absolutely everything to which we can apply the feature *by itself*. Although the rational soul is mentioned in the same context as the *eidè* existing in themselves, it is not regarded as an *eidòs* among the *eidè* because it is merely related (*suggenes*) to the world of forms (cf. *Phaido* 79 d 3).

The invisible (*constant*) can only be conceived by the intellect while the visible (*changeful*) can only be perceived by the senses (*Phaido* 79 a). When the soul investigates without the mediation of the body, it is directed at the world of the *pure* and *eternal, immortal and unchanging, constant and equally natured things* (*Phaido* 79 d). The soul exhibits the greatest similarity to the *divine, immortal, conceivable, simple, indissoluble, constant* and “self-identical,” while the body bears the greatest similarity to the human, *mortal, multifarious, non-conceivable, dissoluble and never-constant* (*Phaido* 80 b 1-6).

Aristotle transposed Plato’s ideal form by considering them to inhere in material things as their *universal substantial forms*. He initially introduced a primary substance that was purely individual (*Categoriae* 1 ff.) — but since he identified knowledge with *universal conceptual knowledge* this would have left him with unknowable (purely individual) things. Therefore inventing the *secondary substance* served to save the possibility of (theoretical) knowledge.

For Aristotle true knowledge is, in principle, (general) *form knowledge*. From this position it follows naturally that matter (*hylè*) stands in opposition to concept formation. In the third Chapter of the seventh Book of his *Metaphysics* Aristotle elaborates this implication of his conception in a negative sense, by subtracting all determinations of being. In doing so, he makes matter as such unknowable. Not only are all positive determinations of being denied in respect of *matter*, for even their *negation* is ultimately not applied to matter (*Metaph.* 1029 a 27-28). The absolute formless matter functions as the limit point of all negative designations. It is therefore justified to discern a true *via negativa* in the conception of Aristotle.<sup>4</sup> Happ considers the possibility to designate the a-categorical (or: pre-categorical) nature of matter with the term *Grenzbegriff* (knowledge exceeding the limits of a concept): “Here precisely the word ‘Grenzbegriff’ presents itself” (Happ 1971:664, note 617). What Happ calls the “highest matter principle (as *dunamei on*) ultimately remains the *dialectical opposite of pure, actual form*”.

Aristotle concentrates the diversity of forms on the original form which he positively designates as the eternal, living, perfect (first) *substance*, pure activity as unmoved mover and thinking on thinking, final cause of everything, and so on. In an intrinsically antinomic way he even attempts to withdraw the unmoved mover from all spatial and temporal determinations. In *De Caelo* Aristotle argues that god (he here intends the unmoved mover) transcends all bodies, time and place. However, at the end of the eighth Book of his *Physics*

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4 We shall return to the tradition of a *negative theology* below.

he describes the unmoved mover in spatial terms — of centre and circumference (*Phys.* 267 b 6-9). In a similar contradictory fashion Aristotle attempts to withdraw *entelecheia* from number with his thesis: *but all things that are many in number have matter* (*Metaph.* 1074 a 33-34). The primary essential being does not have matter for it is *entelecheia* (*Metaph.* 1074 a 35-36). He immediately remarks that the unmoved mover is one (*hen*) both according to concept (*logo*) and according to number (*arithmo*) (*Metaph.* 1074 a 36-37). The form as principle of origin is indeed conceived in a dialectical way for, among other things, space, number and matter are excluded.

This fundamental dialectic in the thought of Aristotle reveals the central motive of Greek thought, in which the primacy is assigned to the form motive. Happ clearly observed that both the form pole and the matter pole within the Greek ground motive presuppose each other in their mutual absoluteness: the “Matter-Form relation ... is ultimately based in a Primordial Relation (Ur-Relation) ‘matter in itself’ (pure matter): ‘pure form’” (Happ 1971:799); “the ‘pure form’ needs the ‘pure matter’, the *energeia* the *dunamis*” (Happ 1971:26).

The Greek wisdom regarding the origin of the universe is therefore ultimately in the grip of the dialectic between form and matter — supported by the conviction that from nothing nothing can become (*ex nihilo nihil fit* — as it was articulated during the medieval era). The *Demiourgos* described in Plato’s dialogue *Timaeus* is merely a workman or craftsman, dependent upon a given material, and not a creator in the true sense of the term. Moreover, the ripened Aristotelian conception according to which an individual thing is constituted by its *matter* (as a permanent substratum — *hipokeimenon*) and universal *substantial form*, combined with the Platonic legacy, laid the foundation for the distinction between *essence* and *appearance*. In the case of Plato, the supra-sensory *eidos* accounts for the *essence* and its copy within the world of the senses for its *appearance*, while, for Aristotle, the universal substantial form serves as the *essence* that is not subject to change. The underlying dualism between form and matter caused a distinction between *accidentia* related to matter (such as quantity) and others related to form (such as quality).

Note that both Plato and Aristotle acknowledged *universality*: the former in the supposedly supra-sensory ideal forms and the latter in the universal substantial forms of entities. While Plato stumbled upon the *order for* (law for) things, Aristotle discerned the *orderliness* of things, for in his *Metaphysics* he remarks that when fire terminates the existence of a house it is not houseness that burnt down (cf. *Metaph.* 1035 b 32; *De Anima* 412 b 16).

The concepts of ontic forms (Plato) and universal substantial forms (Aristotle) serve as the foundation of the substance concept and of the distinction between *essence* and *appearance* — a distinction informed by and in the direction-giving grip of the ultimate Greek basic motive of form and matter.

The dialectical tension in this ground motive is irreconcilable with the biblical basic motive of creation, fall and redemption. Therefore both the medieval attempt to synthesise biblical Christianity with Greek antiquity and the effect of the substance concept upon theological reflection on God harbour inherent dialectical tensions.

This dialectical legacy continued to exhibit the confusing approach of the unity of God in terms of conceptual knowledge and concept-transcending knowledge. It also seemed to be intertwined with an encompassing analogical concept of being, which subsumes God as highest being under the same denominator as those creatures *participating in being*. This implies that, according to their highest being, all creatures are in God. Eventually Thomas Aquinas attempted to side-step this implication by emphasising the idea that the highest unity of being transcends the diversity within creation.

The question as to whether Thomas does justice to the Biblical revelation regarding creation touches upon his view of the first or primary matter (*prima materia*). Closer examination shows that he only relates substances constituted by form and matter to God's act of creation. Consequently Thomas does not speak of primary matter in terms of creation. In *S.Th.* I,44,2 Thomas raises the argument in the third Objection that it is against the nature of matter, which exists only potentially, that it is created. However, in his *Reply* he responds by arguing that the *Objection* does not show that matter is uncreated, but merely that it is not created *without form*.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless it is repeatedly argued in *S.c.G.* that God (as *actus purus*) brought everything into existence without pre-existing matter. These statements do not solve the problem for the question remains: Was primary matter created in its formlessness? When, at the end of *S.c.G.* II,16, Thomas argues that since God is the cause of all things (*causa omnium*), he is also the cause of primary matter (*Deus igitur est causa materiae primae*), he still does not provide a direct answer to this question. A consideration of the mentioned statements of Thomas from *S.Th.* suggests that a direct answer in *S.c.G.* should have been that God did not create (first) matter *without form*. That is to say that God did not *cause* first matter without form.

In itself matter does not have *being* and cannot be known. The focus on the unknowability of matter simply confirms Thomas' dialectical understanding of nature. Does God know evil which essentially (*esse mali*) is a lack of goodness (*est privatio boni*) (*S.Th.* I,14,10)? Although evil as such is unknowable (*sed malum non est per se cognoscibile*), God nonetheless does know it, but only by means of the good (*per bonum*). As *privatio boni* it cannot be determined (*definiri*) in itself or known (*S.Th.* I,14,10).

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5 In *S.Th.* I,15,3 Thomas alleges that matter is created by God, but not without form.

In his *Ouest.Disp. de Ver.* 111,5 Thomas connects the problem of the knowability of evil with the knowability of matter and focuses on the question as to whether God has a cognition of *evil* and *matter*. He commences with the statement that matter is caused by God and therefore has to have an idea in God, for God has an image of everything caused by him. In its proper sense the idea of a thing is concerned with its being (cf. also *S.Th.* I, 14, 10). Because matter does not have an actual existence without form, primary matter cannot have a proper idea in God distinct from the form of its composite image. God does have an idea of things as composed by form and matter, but not of matter on its own. Only insofar as formless matter bears an image of the first form (a copy of the first being) can it have an image in God.

The dialectical implication is clear: only insofar as formless matter is formed does it have a correlating idea in God!

The statement that God caused matter and for that reason must possess a corresponding idea of it merely means that God caused formless matter with form. This again confirms the interpretation that *primary matter* as such, in its *formlessness*, was not caused or created by God.<sup>6</sup>

### 3. THE INFLUENCE OF THE SUBSTANCE CONCEPT UPON THE NEGATIVE COUNTERPART OF POSITIVE THEOLOGY

There are two important lines that crystallised during the medieval era. First, we notice a continuation of the Aristotelian legacy after the rediscovery of his work in the thought of someone like Thomas Aquinas. Secondly, we see the influence of the Eleatic dialogues of Plato (*Theaetetus* and *Parmenides*) upon neo-Platonism and the subsequent *via negativa* of medieval negative theology.

#### 3.1 The Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition

Aristotle intends to ascribe the status of substance only to the combination (composite) of form and matter (*Metaph.* 1041 b 10-30). The substantial form of composite substances is never itself individual: “for a secondary substance is not an individual” (*Cat.* 3 b 15-16). However, the *hyle-morphism* of Aristotle is torn apart by the incompatibility entailed in his view of substance — as being constituted by form and matter. Since matter “in itself” is *unknowable*,

6 Thomas’ exegesis of Ex.3:14 is determined by the dialectical counterpart of this first — unknowable and in itself uncreated — matter, namely the highest form as *ipsum esse* which, according to Kremer, is to a large extent interpreted in a neo-Platonic fashion (Kremer 1966:393, 472).



Aristotle's substance concept can hardly be reconciled with a theory of knowledge in which matter has no epistemic status. Moreover, how can the secondary substance (the universal substantial form) be *multiplied* in individual things if they all realise the *same form*?

The doctrine of the immortality of the soul, which is also immaterial, caused serious problems for Thomas Aquinas, because he accepted the Aristotelian view that *all things that are many in number have matter* (*Metaph.* 1074 a 33-34). A multiplicity of souls or the acknowledgement of individually different souls would then imply that they must have matter. The official position of the Roman Catholic church was that the human soul is an indestructible and immaterial substance — contradicting the Aristotelian view otherwise accepted by Thomas Aquinas, namely that the soul is not a substance in its own right but just the substantial form of the material body. Only the combination of soul and body constitutes the substantial unity of the human being. Both Dooyeweerd and Ter Horst analyse this impasse (see Ter Horst, 2008:16).<sup>7</sup>

The most important feature of the Aristotelian-Thomistic substance concept for the subsequent distinction between “God in Himself” and “God as He revealed Himself to us” is given in the idea of *essence* and *appearance*. Thomas' theory of being indeed attempts to maintain the “essential difference” between God and creature while at the same time levelling it. Kremer explains:

All beings are in such a way in God that in God they are nothing but God. Things are not in God as they are in themselves. Viewed from within themselves they are caused and finite, while in God they coincide with the Divine being. ... In themselves they are many; in God, by contrast, they are one (Kremer 1966:399).

While affirming God's unity, multiplicity is denied. This view is co-determined by a related tradition going back to Plato's mentioned dialogue *Parmenides* — the tradition of a negative theology in which one cannot positively say what God is but only what God is not. This theological tradition negates every affirmative statement about God, because it holds that positive conceptual determinations are inappropriate to account for God.

### 3.2 Negative theology

Plato's dialogue *Parmenides* ought to be appreciated in terms of the dialectical tension present in it. Similar to the way in which the *idea of the good* as primordial image of the divine *demiurg* in *Politeia*, by means of the *eidè* concentrated

<sup>7</sup> In the fourth article dedicated to the Thomistic substance concept Dooyeweerd extensively discusses all the inconsistencies and antinomies present in this concept of a substance (see Dooyeweerd 1946).

in it, merely serves as *form-giver* of the sensory world of becoming, we meet in Parmenides a dialectical opposition between the *One* and the *Unlimited Other*. Considered in their original meaning, these two opposing principles generate negative consequences in respect of conceptual knowledge.

The first antinomy proceeds from the assumption that the One is absolutely one. But then it is impossible to say that it is a *whole*, for a whole is that which contains all its parts, implying that the One then is *many* (*Parmenides* 137 c 4d 3). Likewise, the One is without limits (*Parmenides* 137 d 7-8) and formless (neither round, nor straight: *Parmenides* 137 d 8-e 1). In further elaborating on this antinomy, the narrator shows that the One is nowhere (neither in itself, nor in something else), that it neither moves nor prevails in a state of rest, that it is not identical or different from itself, not similar or dissimilar to itself or anything else, and so on (*Parmenides* 138 a-142 a). Considered consistently in this sense, nothing positive can be said of the absolute One.

In the fourth antinomy the same consequences are drawn with respect to the Other (the Unlimited Many). If the One is absolutely one, then the Other does not exhibit unity, two-ness or multiplicity, then it is not a whole and parts, not equally or unequally natured in respect of itself or something else, not in motion or at rest, and so on (*Parmenides* 159 e-160 b). Where the first antinomy carries the Eleatic hypothesis to a strictly negative conclusion, namely that the absolute One does not participate in any determinations of being (that applies in the same sense in the fourth antinomy to the Other), the second and third antinomies pay attention to the positive implications of the supposition that the One indeed participates in metaphysical being.

The upshot of the dialogue *Parmenides* can be interpreted as follows: as soon as the dialectical understanding of the origin is positively considered, it entangles thinking in the antinomic affirmation and denial of all properties both in respect of the One and the Many — or thinking terminates in the total negation of all determinations of being (or conceptual determinations).

Like Plato, Plotinus (204-270) connected completely negative consequences to the possibilities of concept formation the moment the *One* was understood in the sense of origin (cf. *Parmenides* 137-142). However, in the fourth hypothesis Plato connected equally negative consequences to the unlimited many, understood in its original sense, providing a point of connection for Plotinus, but not as striking as in the case of the first hypothesis. According to Plotinus, the One is motionless (*En. V,2,1*) and without number (*En. V,5,4; V,5,11*). The One is also lacking limit and size (*En. VI, 7, 32*). Repeatedly Plotinus states that it is without form and shape (*En. V,5,6; V,5,11; VI,7,32; VI,7,33, VI,9,3*).

What Plotinus on this instance mentions about the One and matter practically coincides. If from all other particulars are indeed abstracted then the reader without any reservation might have concluded to the complete identity of the One and the many . But that would have twisted the true intention of Plotinus awkwardly. Nonetheless it cannot be denied that a consistent negative interpretation of the One and of matter undeniably leads to such (unintended) “identity conclusions.”

The path which Plotinus follows in this instance emphasises the limits set to concept formation to such an extent that the limit-transcending, referring meaning of a limit concept (an idea) is caught up in a negative mirroring that precludes referring and approximating determinations. However, in order to reveal the true *dialectical opposition* of the *One* and *matter* Plotinus finally had to use *positive* stipulations.

Matter is regarded as the source of evil in its opposition to the *Good* — in which it does not participate (*En.* 1,8,4,22-23). The dialectical opposition of the One and matter is still further specified by Plotinus in terms of the *first* and the *last* (*En.* 1,8,7). Plotinus also refers to the One as the first beautiful (*En.* 1,6,9,40 and 43). As identical exchangeable phrases the One is designated as the Absolute Beautiful (οὐτοκαλον) and Absolute Good (*En.* 1,8,13,10). Plotinus in this instance employs the terms Beauty and the Good both in the sense of the absolute original Unity. Moreover, both terms are also used by Plotinus in a *derivative* sense, that is, they do not serve to refer to the origin. For example, when Plotinus states in *En.* 1,8,2 that all things are beautiful until the Good is reached that is elevated above the beautiful, then there is no contradiction in his argumentation, for the term beauty is clearly not used in the sense of the absolute original Unity. When the Good is taken in the sense of the absolute Unity of Plotinus and beauty is not used in this sense, then it stands to reason that the Good will be viewed as the source and origin of the (non-original) beauty (*En.* 1,6,9,42). Occasionally Plotinus explicitly characterises the One as being elevated *above the good* (*En.* VI,9,6,41; cf. VI,7,33,19 ff.). In this instance the good is taken in a derivative sense: the absolute undifferentiated One is also its source. Compare the way in which Plotinus speaks of the second copied good (*En.* V,3,16,18-19) derived from the absolute Good. Similar to the way in which he speaks of a Beauty above beauty (κάλλος ὑπερ κάλλος, *En.* VI,7,32,29) he also knows a Good above the good.

Plotinus identifies the One with the Good, but notwithstanding this reference to what is hyper-Good he is not tempted to speak of a hyper-One. Why does he merely continue to speak of the One instead of a hyper-One? Without any doubt the answer is that Plotinus took the One in the sense of the *unity* of the *origin* precluding any concept — however perfect we may represent

it to ourselves — because the unity of the (form-giving) origin can only be approximated in concept-transcending (idea) knowledge.<sup>8</sup>

This line of thought was echoed in the contemplations of Pseudo-Dionysius, the Areopagite, found in his negative theological approach. The path of negative theology starts with the finite nature of the lowest creature. By contrast, God, in his transcendence above all things, is hidden in utter darkness. In terms of this negative approach, God is not a being, life, understanding or reason, no body, does not have a place, is formless, without qualities, and not subject to change (Pseudo-Dionysius 1980:4). God is not even an ordering or magnitude, neither is he truth, goodness or spirit. He is neither Father nor Son, neither darkness nor light, neither falsehood nor truth, for it is not possible to make general statements about God. As the perfectly unique cause of everything God is elevated above all affirmation and denial (Pseudo-Dionysius 1980:4). This negative approach follows the thought pattern introduced by Plotinus. Because God transcends all conceptual determinations, the only possibility to speak of God in a meaningful way is to deny all relevant conceptual determinations regarding God.<sup>9</sup>

Clement of Alexandria (150-215) was convinced that statements about God cannot touch His essence — such propositions merely elucidate what God is not. In order not to apply the classical understanding of (conceptual) knowledge — as bringing a multiplicity to a unity — to God, Clement holds that the infinity of God cannot be regarded as combining a multiplicity of parts, therefore God is unknowable (see Mühlenberg, 1966:74). This *simplicity metaphysics* (going back to Xenophanes) postulates an absolute unity (simple and without multiplicity), similar to the *One* found in the philosophy of Plotinus (described as *a-pollon* = without multiplicity). Clement argues that from the “fact” that the infinite does not have parts, an absence of shape and determination follows. Gregory of Nazianzus holds that the “only thing that could be comprehended about the incomprehensible divine nature was its ‘boundlessness [*apeira*]’, what it is not rather than what it was” (Pelikan 1993:41).

Gregor of Nyssa attempts to rely on the language of negation in order to escape from inconsistencies. Pelikan explains that for Gregor of Nyssa all “language about the divine was inadequate”. Yet in pursuing this path all problems do not simply disappear. Pelikan quotes the Cappadocians saying resignedly: “But having no other words to employ, we employ what we have”. He continues:

[they were] protecting such words against blasphemous distortion by means of negation (expressed here by introducing the Classical rhetorical figure of

8 Kremer highlights this aspect with explicit reference to the idea of unity: “the One transcends our concept of unity”. On the same page it is said that the unity of the One “simply exceeds every created concept of unity” (Kremer 1966:171).

9 Proclus also maintained the Plotinian conviction that every affirmation of the One (the Good) diminishes the fullness of its reality.

chiasmus): 'Thou art called *Logos*, and thou art above *logos*; thou art above light, yet art named light' (Pelikan 1993:44).<sup>10</sup>

Gregory of Nyssa (335–±394) occupies an influential position in this legacy. Within the philosophical and theological tradition he was the first thinker to introduce the predicate of *infinity* to God.<sup>11</sup> Of importance for our theme is that Gregory of Nyssa holds that the nature of God is ineffable, i.e., that it exceeds any adequate verbal description. When Gregory of Nyssa speaks of what surpasses “all understanding” he has the divine *nous* in mind (cf Pelikan 1993:46, 48, 210). One of the key expressions employed in this connection is the idea of *transcendence* (see Pelikan 1993:48, 49, 52, 206–208). Within the domain of language this idea of transcendence is articulated in terms of what can and cannot be designated. Pelikan remarks that none of the names for the divine nature conveys its essence — the latter remains ‘unsignified [asemantos].’ “No name was worthy to express the nature of God” (see Pelikan 1993:209). The *ousia* of God (God’s substance) transcends all distinct attributes. When Pelikan summarises this position the subtle underlying distinction is that between God in Himself and God as revealed to us (*ousia* and *attributes*):

It was indeed possible for finite mortals to know, as attributes of God and actions of God, the greatness, the power, the wisdom, the goodness, the providence, and the justice of God, but it was not possible for them to know the very *ousia* of God. For that *ousia* was too transcendent to be possessed of any distinctive attributes (Pelikan 1993:208).

When it is stated that we “know nothing else of God but this one thing, that God is”, then this “God is” in fact intends the incomprehensible *divine ousia*. The words “we know” generated a warning, namely that “by this negative predication” we do not “understand the subject” since we “are guided as to what we must not think concerning the subject” – without disclosing “the transcendent *ousia* of God”.

Pelikan himself raises a serious concern in this connection regarding the merits of such a negative theological approach:

That kind of exegetical argumentation by the Cappadocians inevitably raised the question of whether this left any room for faith in a reliable divine revelation, together with the question of how a divine being defined in

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- 10 In anticipation of our alternative argument below we may note in this instance that the Cappadocian stance stumbles upon the twofold use of certain terms – what we shall designate as *conceptual knowledge* and *concept-transcending knowledge*.
- 11 The determination and delimitation required by concept formation burdened this option, because the infinite cannot be grasped in a delimiting concept. The ultimate perspective entailed in the theology of Origines (185–254), for example, held that God is *delimited* (*De Princ.* II,9,1 — see Mühlenberg 1966:26).

such negative terms could at the same time serve as the foundation for the Cappadocian doctrine of the relation between the one divine *ousia* and the three divine *hypostases* in the Trinity (Pelikan 1993:214).

An implication of the Cappadocian approach is that a distinction is drawn between God’s knowledge of Himself and God’s speaking to us (in whatever language). The latter is said to be “accommodated to the language of the day” — “recorded and written ‘after human fashion’” (Pelikan 1993:43). Luther also holds that when God is clothed with a human voice he has accommodated Himself to what we can understand (see Clouser 2005:221). Calvin emphasises that the essence of God is incomprehensible (*Inst.* I, v, 1; Calvin 1931:17).

The distinction between *cataphatic* and *apophatic* modes of speech underlying the opposed inclinations of a *positive* and a *negative* theology derives from certain consequences entailed within the classical concept of substance. Historically the most significant effect of this concept of substance is found in the frequently mentioned opposition between *essence* and *appearance* that seems to be quite innocent. It inspired the conviction that it is biblical to hold the view that God in Himself is unknowable (incomprehensible) to us and therefore had to make Himself knowable to us by *accommodating* Himself to human language and adapting Himself to our understanding.

Clearly knowledge of God and God’s revelation are crucial issues to be contemplated in an attempt to respect and appreciate God’s transcendence. The key issues are:

- What is the difference between positive affirmations and negations when we speak about God?
- What are the nature and limits of human concepts?
- Can we know God “in Himself” or only as He “revealed” Himself to us?
- Is it possible to explain the universe in an “immanent” way, without any appeal to “transcendence” whatsoever?
- How do we have to understand God’s transcendence when creature properties (such as love, life, power, and so on) in biblical language are ascribed to God (such as God is love, life, power and so on)?

#### 4. CONCEPT-TRANSCENDING KNOWLEDGE

Early Greek philosophers started to search for something *lasting* within a world of *change*. After the initial *arithmeticism* of the Pythagoreans the school of Parmenides explored the static meaning of space as an all-encompassing mode of explanation (strikingly manifested in the arguments of Zeno against multiplicity and movement).

The space metaphysics of Parmenides identified *thought* and *being*, whereas Heraclitus explored the apparent dialectic between *constancy* and *dynamics* (*persistence* and *change*). This prompted Plato to secure the possibility of knowledge by postulating the (static and unchanging) essential being of things to be known, embedded within the spatial opposition of *inside-outside*. The development of the *substance* concept twisted a proper understanding of the relationship between constancy and dynamics (change). Nonetheless Plato's speculative theory of static ontic forms did explore the significant insight that change can only be established on the basis of persistence (constancy). The natural scientific importance of this insight surfaced much later in the thought of Galileo and Einstein.

Galileo realised that motion is a *unique mode of explanation* and therefore something moving does not need — as Aristotle believed — a causing force. Something moving will continue its movement endlessly — unless something affects it. This means that one cannot ask about the cause of motion but only about the cause of a change of motion (deceleration or acceleration). In addition, the core meaning of uniform motion — pertaining to the kinematic aspect of reality — forms the basis of the physical aspect of energy-operation. This foundational coherence suggests a more exact formulation of the first main law of thermodynamics (the law of energy conservation). This law should in fact be designated as the law of *energy constancy*.

The idea of the *identity* of an entity — its persistence over time despite changes — also explores the foundational coherence between the kinematic and physical aspects of reality. Yet there is something more at stake if an account is given of our awareness of identity. Although an insight into the meaning of persistence (constancy) is required, the idea of the identity of an entity does not merely relate to its function within the kinematic aspect of reality. The idea of the identity of an entity refers to all its aspectual functions, not only its kinematic function. Yet the kinematic aspect continues to be the point of orientation. When the function of an entity within the kinematic aspect is given, it concerns the relative motion of such an entity within the boundaries of this aspect. What happens in the case of the idea of its identity is that we still employ our basic insight into the core meaning of motion — *constancy* — but at once expand its employment to refer beyond the boundaries of this aspect. We may call this a concept-transcending way of employing aspectual terms. In other words, when the awareness of uniform motion is applied to the description of a uniformly moving body in a purely (abstract) kinematic sense, we explore a *conceptual use* of the phrase *uniform motion*. However, the moment we expand our scope, using the term 'constancy' in order to refer to the identity of an entity over time, despite the changes it may experience, then the intuition of constancy is applied in a *concept-transcending* way, manifest in our speaking of the identity of such an entity.

Against the background of the static space metaphysics of the Eleatic school, the substance concept added another metaphysical dimension to the understanding of reality — particularly highlighted in the opposition between *essence* and *appearance*. This distinction intimately coheres with the spatial opposition of *above* and *below*, leading to the metaphysical separation of the *noumenal* (what is supra-sensory) and the *phenomenal* (what is sensory), opposing the *transcendent essence* to the phenomenal world of the senses (appearances).

The underlying connotation attached to this idea of *substance* is the literal meaning of “standing-on-itself” (Greek: *hypo-stasis*; Latin: *sub-stantia*). Consider Descartes’ definition of the term substance: “By substance we can conceive nothing else than a thing which exists in such a way as to stand in need of nothing beyond itself in order to its existence” (*The Principles of Philosophy* Part I, LI).

## 5. THE IDEA OF GOD

It is clear that since its emergence in Greek culture (informed by the basic dialectic of form and matter), the *substance concept* stood in opposition to the idea of *an integral cosmic coherence*. Our preceding investigation shows that subsequent theological reflections on the relation between God and creation, as well as regarding God’s revelation, bought into the substance concept in order to account for the “essence” and “appearance” of God. The negative theological line from Plato’s dialogue *Parmenides* to the Cappadocians, Plotinus, Pseudo-Dionysius and certain elements in the thought of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas simply elevated the element of constancy to the level of the unknowable essence of God.

Basically those who accepted the meaning of the substance concept explored two options:

- Affirm (!) that nothing can be affirmed (!) about God — in His transcendence (*aseitas*, as *causa sui*) — “God-in-Himself” is unknowable. (By the way: If God’s ‘essence’ is *unknowable*, how do we then *know* that it is *unknowable*?) This option then further explored the essence-appearance opposition by applying it to God — some (“essential”) properties are *incommunicable* and others (“appearance”) properties are *communicable*. (Bavinck explains: “For the knowledge, which God has of itself, is absolute, simple, infinite, and in its absoluteness incommunicable to the finite consciousness.”).

In terms of this first option, when the essence-appearance scheme is applied to God, the diversity within creation (designated by Thomas Aquinas as “perfections”) is “absorbed” (accommodated) to God, because (as Aquinas



advances this view), what we consider *good* in creatures, ‘pre-exist’ in God, albeit in a superior and alternative way:

Cum igitur dicitur: Deus est bonus; non est sensus: id, quod bonitatem dicimus in creaturis, praeexistit in Deo: et hoc quidem secundum modum altiore.

— S.Th. I,13,2. (Bear in mind that, according to St. Thomas, being (*esse*) and essence (*essentia*) coincide in God — S.Th.I,3,4 and I,13,11). Thomas holds that we know God by means of the *perfections* as they flow from Him into creatures (procedentibus in creaturas ab ipso — S.Th. I,13,3) — having commenced from a position where the creational diversity was first duplicated in God (this is typical of the circle entailed in all forms of *theo-ontology*: take something *from creation*, *position* it in God and then *copy* it back to creation).

**To summarise:** The first option (theo-ontologically) duplicated (accommodated) the creational diversity into the communicable (appearance) part of God — as the counter-pole of the *esse(nce)* part (namely “God-in-Himself”).

- The second option does not differ from the first one regarding the elevated unknowability of “God-in-Himself”. The only difference is that instead of accommodating creation to God (projecting all the creaturely perfections into God), the unknowable God accommodated Himself to creation by assuming creational properties (an implication of this stance may add that God subjected Himself to the laws of creation).

Bavinck writes:

Nonetheless it contains the true conception that the *theologia ectypa*, which is granted to creatures through the revelation, is not the absolute self-knowledge of God, but that knowledge of God as it is accommodated to and made suitable for the finite consciousness, therefore anthropomorphized.<sup>12</sup>

Since medieval Scholastic theology, this distinction was designated as that between the *theologia archetypa* (the knowledge with which God knows Himself) and *theologia ectypa* (the knowledge with which God made Himself known to us). [Hepp used to enter his theological classes telling the students

12 “Desnietemin ligt er de ware gedachte in, dat de theologia ectypa, welke door de openbaring aan schepselen geschonken wordt, niet is de absolute zelfkennis Gods, maar die kennis Gods, gelijk ze geaccommodeerd is naar en geschikt gemaakt is voor het eindig bewustzijn, dus geanthropomorphiseerd” (Bavinck H. 1918. Gereformeerde Dogmatiek I. 6, 4, p.144).

that in one year he will lecture on the knowledge with which God knows Himself, and in another year about the knowledge concerning the way in which he accommodated Himself to us and thus made Himself known to us.]

**To summarize:** In the second option, still as the counter-pole of the *esse(nce)* part (namely “God-in-Himself”), God accommodated Himself to the creational diversity in order to explain the “appearance” (revelation) of God to creatures.

## 6. AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH

Because concept formation always entails an appeal to universal properties that cannot be divorced from universal conditions it is in principle impossible to acquire a concept of God, for God is indeed the origin of all conditions and of *being conditioned*. Can one then still claim that a concept of God is possible? After all, having a concept of God would imply that there is an *order for being-a-God*, i.e. a (universal) *law-for-being-God*, holding for multiple “Gods” — of which the biblical God would merely be *one* example. Thus God is subjected to His own laws for creation and, turning God into a creature, subjecting God to the conditions for being a God! For this reason it is correct to claim that God transcends conceptual knowledge.

This argument derives from a non-reductionist ontology. Its aim is to accept the creational diversity for what it is without attempting to explain everything merely in terms of some or other mode of explanation within creation. Its significance for theology is to help theologians understand that, in order to speak of God, we do not have access to terms not proceeding from and making an appeal to what is given *within creation*. However, the aim of using these (creational) terms (as the Bible does) is to convey the conviction that God *transcends* all of creation. This raises the question: How can we uphold God’s transcendence when we are ‘doomed’ to do this in a “creational way” by using “creational terms”?

A starting-point certainly is the straightforward *positive* biblical account, where, for example, it is said that God is life, God is love, God is omnipotent, God is omnipresent, God is just, and so on. What is at stake in this instance?

When the Bible mentions that God is love, just or wise, then there is nothing “unkown (and therefore different)” *behind* this revelation, for if it were the case, God turns into a *Deus absconditum*, a God that cannot be revealed or known at all. Yet God simply **is** the love, wisdom and justice the Bible informs us about — but **in** His love, wisdom and justice He transcends whatever we can *conceptually* know of Him. Therefore the only remaining option seems to take God’s Word seriously and to accept that God **is** the love, wisdom and justice the Bible asserts. At the same time we must acknowledge that through an idea

use of the ethical term *love*, the logical term *wisdom* and the jural term *justice*, our knowledge of God can approximate God's love, wisdom and justice without conceptually encompassing any one of these affirmations. We can believe God's Word — God **is** the love He says He is; there is not an unknowable 'essence' behind what is revealed. Rather, in the (trustworthy) love that He says He is, God transcends whatever we can *conceptualise* of God. True knowledge of God therefore always displays a *concept-transcending nature*.

Instead of "accommodating" the diversity within creation to God or "accommodating" God to the creational diversity, one can argue that *within* creation we, as human beings, are equipped with a cognitive ability whereby we can exceed the confines and limitations of *conceptual knowledge*. This can be done by employing *concept-transcending knowledge*. Our knowledge of God through His revelation merely explores this "built-in" capacity of (concept transcending) human knowing. As creatures we therefore know, in a *creaturely manner*, that as Creator, Law-Giver, Sustainer and Redeemer, God transcends<sup>13</sup> creation and is not subject to creational laws in any way (of course, according to his human nature, Christ *was* subject to the laws of creation — but this is not questioned in any respect in the preceding analysis).<sup>14</sup> An integral idea of God should not favour certain idea-usages of modal terms (love over power or vice versa) or privileged metaphors (such as Father over King or vice versa).

## 7. CONCLUDING REMARK

From our preceding analysis it is clear that unconsciously particular philosophical thought patterns may exert a decisive influence on crucial theological distinctions. Nothing within theology seems to be closer to the core of its entire enterprise than how God is understood. Yet, despite the best of pious intentions and a sincere respect for God's transcendence, we still have discerned

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13 Of course, it is not meaningful to claim that speaking of God cannot employ spatial terms because God transcends creation (and therefore also space). What is overlooked, however, is that an integral biblical idea of God cannot side-step the scope of any aspect of creation — while bearing in mind that the meaning of the cosmic aspects are explored in a concept-transcending manner. The statement that God transcends creation (and space) still explores — in a concept-transcending way — the meaning of space! *Transcend* implies "being elevated above", which is clearly derived from the meaning of space. The rejection of a spatial mode of speaking is therefore dependent upon a concept-transcending use of spatial terms.

14 The idea that God's accommodation requires that God is subject to creational laws actually applies aspectual terms in a conceptual way to God — while we argue that they can solely be used to refer to God in a concept-transcending way.

the longstanding influence of the Greek concept of substance which ultimately was informed by the dialectical (un-biblical) ground motive of form and matter. Moreover, this substance concept appeared to be intimately connected to the space metaphysics of the school of Parmenides and the struggle to account for something lasting in a world of change (the problem of constancy and change). We have questioned the influence of the distinction between *essence* and *appearance*, derived from the Greek-Scholastic substance concept, upon the theological distinction between the *theologia archetypa* and *theologia ectypa*.

Developing a structural theory of reality that avoids the pitfalls of the substance concept exceeds the confines of this article. For that reason we have only briefly explored the epistemological distinction between conceptual knowledge and concept-transcending knowledge in order to advance an account that aims at doing justice to the impossibility of forming a concept of God while at the same time upholding that reliable *knowledge* of God is possible — albeit concept-transcending knowledge (idea-knowledge).

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

B Fr. = B Fragments of the pre-Socratic philosophers edited and published by Diels and Kranz.

*Categoriae* = One of Aristotle’s works – sometime also abbreviated to: *Cat.*

*Cratylus* = One of Plato’s dialogues.

*De Anima* = Aristotle’s work on the *soul*.

D-K = Diels and Krantz.

*En.* = The work of Plotinus named *The Enneads*.

*Gorgias* = One of Plato’s dialogues.

*Metaph.* = Aristotle’s work named *Metaphysics*.

*Inst* = Calvin’s *Institutes*.

*Parmenides* = One of Plato’s dialogues.

*Ouest.Disp. de Ver.* = The work of Thomas Aquinas named *Questiones Disputate de Veritate*.

*Phaido* = One of Plato’s dialogues.

*Phys.* = Aristotle’s work named *Physica*.

*S.c.G.* = The work of Thomas Aquinas named *Summa contra Gentiles*.

*S.Th* = The work of Thomas Aquinas named *Summa Theologica*.

*Keywords*

*Trefwoorde*

Substance

Substansie

Negative theology

Negatiewe teologie

Theo-ontology

Teo-ontologie

Conceptual knowledge

Begripkennis

Concept-transcending knowledge

Begripstransenderende kennis